

# Editorial

**H**uman nature has an incurable tendency towards arrogance. Some people are always sure that they are moving forwards in their thought—making new discoveries, breaking new ground. So obsessed do they become with this belief in their own innovative genius that they persuade themselves that the frailty of humanity, as understood by their forefathers, is now a thing of the past. The teaching of the old Book on sin can be ignored.

Actually, things might not be quite so bad if the Bible's teaching was simply ignored by these clever people (by worldly standards, some of them are very clever). Yet for inexplicable reasons, they do not seem to be able entirely to ignore the Scriptures. They have to deride the Book, and to seek in every way they can to discredit it.

The second Psalm tells us that God is not intimidated by those who oppose his holy truth and try to cast off his eternal commandments. He holds such people in derision.

### So reasonable

The new ideas urged by the member of the little church at Thyatira were put

forward with convincing skill and persuasive arguments. There can be no doubt about it: she was a very clever woman. Not an ordained teacher in the church, but someone with lots of ideas. Hers was a restless mind that was always seeking to venture into unknown territory.

(That is not necessarily a bad thing. But when the unknown territory becomes forbidden territory—forbidden by God, that is—then it is time to draw back, however reasonable the pathway being taken might seem).

### Compassionate too

She could well have been motivated by compassion. She saw that many marriages were in difficulties, and that certain spouses, male and female, felt they were not having satisfying relationships with their marital partners.

Because she was such a helpful, broadminded and pleasant person, some of these confided in her and she counselled them. That's probably how it all began. Something like that, anyway. There was a fellow who was having an affair and was finding his illicit (in narrow biblical terms) lover a great help compared to his nagging

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wife. His case was followed by a woman whose husband was a self-centred autocrat; she had found a divorced man in need of tender care, and together they had a lovely relationship going.

It only needed a few more such cases to persuade the sympathetic lady of Thyatira that she was on to something new, something no one(?) had ever realised before: namely, that some extra-marital relationships can be more helpful than marital relationships. So began a new 'adventure' for many of the members of the fellowship of Thyatira.

Her ideas caught on. There were a few old traditionalists who frowned on the new tolerant broadmindedness. But they were old-fashioned, refusing to accept that times had changed, and failing to see that new approaches were needed in that modern day and age. So her influence grew.

However, the displeasure of the King and Head of the Church with the fellowship at Thyatira grew in direct proportion to the new teacher's influence.

### What Christ said

He was moved neither by the lady's reasonable arguments nor by her compassionate personality. He called her *Jezebel*. He said the pastoral work she had been doing and the foul trend she had started in the church were diabolical. He called on men to return to their wives and love them faithfully; likewise, the women must return to their husbands and be faithful to them. He warned that unless they did, they would have no part in his kingdom, but come under his awesome judgement.

You can read all about it in Revelation 2:18-29.

### Holy living

What went wrong with the innovative genius of the lady of Thyatira? The same as goes wrong with the thinking of all those who set to one side the eternal laws (and with them, the eternal character) of the eternal God.

Yes, God is Love. Yes, he knows our

frame and understands that we are dust. Therefore he pities us. Yet he summons us to holy living. There can never be a substitute for holiness. Two articles in this issue of *The Journal* seek to reflect the necessary but difficult tension between holiness and compassion. If ever a generation needed churches to remember, proclaim and live out the *holy love* of God, it is our generation.

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Now on to an altogether different kind of situation for the Church.

### Toronto Blessing

Both the secular and religious press have carried reports of the so-called Toronto Blessing. Very recently, I found myself attending a fellowship which is experiencing this phenomenon. I wanted to see for myself what it was about. I must confess that I attended the church with some misgivings, in that I had been approached by a friend in deep distress because his home fellowship had been swept off its feet (literally) by the 'blessing'.

My friend had grave reservations. The previous week, the celebration of the Lord's Supper had hardly been heard by the congregation on account of apparently uncontrollable 'holy laughter' from those who had been 'blessed'. Thereafter, the minister and his wife (both in their staid mid-fifties), had rolled about the floor at the front of the church, with others, possessed by holy mirth. Grown men and women had been crawling around on all fours, bleating like sheep and roaring like lions. The minister of the church was calling on his people to rejoice that the God of Jonathan Edwards was at work today with manifestations of...

So I went to see for myself.

I was looking for a faithful exposition of God's Word, reminiscent of the preaching of past revivals. However, in the sermon there was nothing about God, or sin, or forgiveness. Instead, we were given the strangest explanation of the kicking of John the Baptist in the womb of his

mother Elizabeth, when Mary the mother of our Lord went to visit her. The lesson? The Holy Spirit can, and wants to, do unusual things with our bodies. Christ leads his sheep out of the fold into new, unexpected areas, we were told. We must, therefore, follow where he leads.

### Physical phenomenon

After the sermon, we all had to stand in prayer, waiting for the 'blessing' to come. Spectators were asked to leave. Only those seeking the 'blessing' were welcome to stay. After about fifteen minutes, during which the minister talked to us softly and invited us to seek God in this new way, the first girl was 'carpetted': she keeled over and fell on her back. Those standing next to her reacted quickly and broke her fall. Just in front of me, a boy of about the same age (late teens) went next. His fall, too, was broken. 'Workers' hurried to bend over those who had been carpetted and prayed for them.

Within a few minutes, there must have been seven or eight who had collapsed similarly, though one adult woman, in contrast to those who were lying motionless, was writhing and shaking. Another woman appeared to be having contractions. Others shook uncontrollably. The situation seemed to me to be approaching pandemonium. Deeply disturbed, I felt it was time to leave.

I admit this is subjective, but there was for me no sense of the presence of God at all. It was disturbingly weird, and I had the strong conviction that here was a demonstration of something which was breaching the God-created 'city-walls' of *mansoul*. What I mean is that we all have natural defences which guard our *psyche* but it seemed to me that those natural defences were being broken down, and the results were really very frightening.

### The challenge to churches

All this is nothing new. There have always been assaults on the Church, both from within and without. We are not to be amazed or taken by surprise. The Lord said, 'By their fruits you will

know them'.

Our duty remains clear. We are to be steadfast in the work of the Lord. We are to proclaim the great truths of God with all the energy the Holy Spirit inspires: his holiness and majesty; his radiant glory; his deep compassion; his abhorrence of sin; his provision for atonement in the blood of his beloved Son; his command that all repent; his universal offer of salvation; his call to holy living. Our preaching must be saturated in prayer.

Without his Word, we would be like rudderless ships on an ocean of countless currents and tides. But with the Word of our God—our supreme authority in all matters of faith and conduct—we have a sure guide. There is no need for alarm or despair. He who gave us the Word, and who brings his Church into being by that same Word, will neither desert his Church nor his Word.

The Word must be rightly understood and interpreted within the acknowledged discipline of the reformed faith. We must beware of strange new fashions which isolate certain passages of Scripture, remove them from their context and explain them in a sense which runs contrary to the received message of the Book. Much of the New Testament was written to ensure that individual churches maintained a steady course towards the heavenly harbour; they needed to be kept from veering off on a tack never intended by the Captain, which would end in their becoming separated from the rest of the Church of God. It is not only that dangerous rocks lie just beneath the surface, waiting to wreck those who lose their way. It is also that a church 'off course' is of no use whatsoever in the work of the kingdom.

To change the figure, we are called to stand true. 'Be faithful unto death, and I will give you a crown of life.... To him who overcomes and does my will to the end...I will also give the morning star. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches' (Rev. 2:10, 26ff.).

## *Preaching*

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# Preaching and Contemporary Trends

**Derek Prime**

**O**ur purpose is to consider the place given to preaching by the Church in its life today, particularly in the light of contemporary trends. What I say must necessarily be influenced by what I have personally observed, and I recognise that what I have found may not be typical, although I fear that it may be.

### **Contemporary Trends**

Preaching has lost its central place in many parts of the Church—to the Church's great detriment—and there has been something of a reaction to the prominence traditionally given to it. There is the playing down of preaching on the part of some, including those who are professedly evangelical. There may be good reason for this, since in some instances preaching has been poor and unworthy. Preaching, like other good gifts of God, has been abused.

Some have used the pulpit as a coward's castle from which they have made pronouncements without having to take public criticism in return. They have used it to forward their own ideas rather than gospel truth. But our concern is with faithful preaching of God's Word, not the propagation of human ideas or opinions.

### **Preaching devalued**

Let me illustrate by three circumstances what I mean when I suggest that preaching is being played down. First, in July 1989 the Lausanne Committee on World Evangelisation called together over 3,500 evangelicals from over 170 nations. A report in *Evangelicals Now* by Alan Gibson, Secretary of the British Evangelical Council, contained this comment, 'I was not alone in expressing to one of the Committee my dismay that there was no study track on the place, power and potential of preaching as a means of evangelism. Many participants resented being manipulated by the

emotional pressure from the platform and disappointed by the meagre diet of an exposition worthy of the name. Of nine electives on the role of the Holy Spirit in evangelism, not one was devoted to the ministry of the Spirit through the Word.'

Second, a minister shared with me that his deacons had been complaining about his preaching, saying that it was altogether too cerebral, and not easy to listen to. They wanted less emphasis upon preaching in the church's life.

Third, a young church, which has never had a pastor and was on the point of calling one, turned back from such a step. A contributory factor was that not a few did not want an important place to be given to teaching. Instead they wanted the emphasis to be upon participation and 'celebration'.

If we move around evangelical churches and gatherings, there is sometimes little room given to preaching, and if space is given to it, it may not be regarded as a priority. Considerable contemporary emphasis is placed upon dialogue and discussion, and the value of small groups, so that instead of men and women listening to teaching and preaching, group Bible study and the sharing of ideas may replace it. Much spiritual blessing has come through a new understanding of worship, but a danger is that far more time may be given to singing than to listening to God through his Word.

### **The Spirit of the Age**

Inevitably a variety of circumstances are behind our present situation. One reason is the spirit of the age in which we live in that it is not thought appropriate to tell anyone else what to do. Psychiatrists tend to be non-directive rather than directive in their approach. That may well be entirely appropriate to them, but it is not the case for the Christian teacher and preacher who is called upon to speak 'as one speaking the very words of God' (1 Pet. 4:11). Christian teaching and preaching are clearly directive—we proclaim what God says, not what we think.

Another reason is that we live in a visual rather than an aural society. As a

consequence people's powers and habits of concentration are shorter than they used to be, especially when it comes to the spoken word.

A serious but not always explicit reason is that people may not be convinced of the Bible's authority. Convictions about the Bible's inspiration and authority inevitably influence our readiness to give heed to it.

People have grown up in recent dec-

## ***we should speak with the authority of the Holy Spirit—the opposite of trusting ourselves***

ades without the discipline of learning to listen. For example, it is frequently assumed without debate that children should not be encouraged to sit through a service, and consequently people are not brought up with the habit of listening.

### **Satanic influence**

We have to admit too, sadly, that preachers themselves sometimes fail to give priority to preaching. They become side-tracked through involvement in counselling and social concerns. So far as the New Testament is concerned the work of a pastor is also to be that of a teacher—the gift of pastors and teachers is one and the same gift. Those who preach may shirk the discipline of study which is in itself a prerequisite for effective preaching, and such disciplined study in no way denies our dependence upon God the Holy Spirit.

We should not be surprised that preaching is not universally welcomed, even among God's people, since that has always been the case to some extent. Paul wrote to Titus, 'In your teaching show integrity, seriousness and soundness of speech that cannot be condemned, so that those who oppose you may be ashamed because they have nothing bad to say about us' (Tit. 2:7, 8). Aspects of faithful preaching will never be popular to the natural man and woman, and not least when it comes to admonition. Referring to the preach-

ing of our Lord Jesus Christ, Paul writes, 'We proclaim him, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone perfect in Christ' (Col. 1:28).

Behind whatever reasons we may suggest for the playing down of the priority of preaching is the work of Satan, the enemy of souls. He knows its power, if God's people do not. He knows that the Word of God is living seed and that

preaching releases it into people's lives. He is assured of its power to convict, to build up, to equip believers, and to enlighten. He knows its power as an invincible weapon—a spiritual sword—against him. There can be little doubt, therefore, that he is behind every move to play it down, and he will always do this in subtle ways, perhaps encouraging us to give other activities greater prominence rather than to neglect it altogether.

## **The Importance of Preaching**

How important is preaching? Any honest review of Bible teaching on preaching must conclude that it is of fundamental importance in God's strategy for the outworking of his saving purposes. It is significant that the first parable the gospels record our Lord telling at the beginning of his ministry was the parable of the sower. The sower sows the seed—the seed of the Word of God.

### **Testimony about God**

Preaching is important because of its subject matter—it is 'the testimony about God', and his testimony about 'Jesus Christ and him crucified.' It is the means of bringing men and women to faith in Jesus Christ. 'Faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ'

(Rom. 10:17). As we proclaim Christ in all the Scriptures, and according to them, men and women are brought to faith in him. Preaching is the instrument the Holy Spirit is pleased to use as none other.

### **New birth through preaching**

As the good news of the Lord Jesus is preached, the kingdom of God is opened to men and women—this happened to the Jews first at Pentecost and then to the Gentiles at Caesarea. New birth comes through the preaching of the Word as it reveals our Lord Jesus Christ and produces faith in him.

Preaching is thereafter a vital means of bringing believers to their full maturity in Christ. As we go on to proclaim the whole will of God revealed in Scripture, believers are encouraged and helped to go forward to adult Christian understanding and behaviour.

It is important for us not to respond simply negatively to some of the unhelpful aspects of the down-grading of preaching. Rather we need to respond positively and constructively, recognising that we ourselves may have been at fault, and have contributed to the failings we criticise. There is little if no value in voicing criticisms if we do not determine the positive contribution we should aim at making in this vital area to the life of the Church.

## **The Way Forward**

To begin with, there are truths relating to preaching we need to teach God's people. First, we must never take for granted instruction concerning the inspiration and authority of the Scriptures themselves. Contemporary neglect—and sometimes despising—of credal or doctrinal statements means that people's spiritual understanding is often not firmly anchored in fundamental doctrines.

Second, we need to establish and demonstrate the adequacy or sufficiency of Scripture: they are 'useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every

good work'. One of the most effective ways of underlining the spiritual and practical relevance of the Scriptures is for us to use them day by day in the course of our pastoral work. Our people should be accustomed to our turning them to the Bible whenever we are encouraging and counselling them.

Third, we must explain the special place God gives to preaching. God's people need to appreciate why we give our time and energies to it, and how they may be workers together with those who teach and preach by their own obedience to God's Word, by their prayers, and their bringing others to hear the good news proclaimed.

Fourth, we need to be encouraged—and hopefully excited—by the manner in which church growth is described in the New Testament. It is consistently explained in terms of the growth of the Word of God. Three key statements in the Acts are: 'So the word of God spread...'; 'But the word of God continued to increase and spread' 'In this way the word of God spread widely and grew in power' (Acts 6:7; 12:24; 19:20). Consistent with this emphasis Paul urges the Thessalonians, 'Pray for us that the message of the Lord may spread rapidly and be honoured, just as it was with you' (2 Thes. 3:1).

### **Christ-centred sermons**

The way forward in the contemporary climate regarding preaching is not to neglect our gift, but rather to ensure that our preaching is the best of which we are capable. We should be well-pre-

pared to overlook the gospels in favour of the epistles, and not to neglect the narrative parts of the Bible. We should be varied in the manner in which we approach subjects, so that we do not become totally predictable in our presentation and then uninteresting.

An absolute priority is ensuring that our preaching is Christ-centred and Christ-glorifying. Of every text, subject, or passage of Scripture, we should ask the question, 'What is the relationship of this subject or passage to the Person and work of Jesus Christ?' There may not always be an answer to that question, but usually there will be. We should then demonstrate that answer at some point in what we say.

### **Burning hearts**

We should speak with conviction and with a burning heart. Never should we stand up before others to declare God's Word without that Word having first spoken with power to our own heart, and with it being implemented by obedience in our own life.

We should speak with authority—the authority of the Holy Spirit (the opposite of trusting in ourselves). It should be plain why we are directive, in that our desire is for God alone to speak. If we do not have that conviction, we should not teach and preach. If we handle God's Word aright, we will regularly direct ourselves and others into God's ways, without apology. Preaching is deliberately directive, and ceases to be biblical if it is non-directive. The best counselling of God's people is that

## ***playing down the priority of preaching is the work of Satan***

pared, giving priority to study and preparation. We should be interesting in our presentation of God's truth. Where visual aids are helpful, we should not despise using them, for the visual can support and enhance what is heard.

We should aim at being balanced in our presentation of God's truth, aiming at a proper balance between preaching from the Old and New Testaments, not

which is done through preaching, in that through it—usually without our knowing it—the Spirit in his sovereignty may bring appropriate direction and counsel to every hearer.

The way forward is to persevere in our teaching and preaching whatever may be the response. Paul counselled Timothy, 'Devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to preaching

and to teaching. Do not neglect your gift, which was given you through a prophetic message when the body of elders laid their hands on you. Be diligent in these matters; give yourself wholly to them, so that everyone may see your progress. Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers' (1 Tim. 4:13–16).

### **The preacher's progress**

I find it interesting that Paul should indicate the 'progress' Timothy was to make in his teaching and preaching. We should always be learning and then unconsciously demonstrate our progress in our preaching, both in content and presentation. Again Paul wrote, 'The Lord's servant must not quarrel; instead, he must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful. Those who oppose him he must gently instruct, in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the

truth, and that they will come to their senses and escape from the trap of the devil, who has taken them captive to do his will' (2 Tim. 2:24–26).

The way forward is to explain the complementary nature of Bible study groups and preaching. There is a place for both: for listening to teaching and preaching and for group Bible study. But the second must not preclude the former. Small groups are of undoubted profit and it does not have to be a matter of either/or, although unfortunately it can work out that way in practice. Bible study groups should complement preaching; they are a bonus, but not a replacement.

### **The Word and Worship**

In our discussion of worship, we must show how one of the important purposes of singing is to enable the Word of Christ to dwell in us richly. Worship is not limited to singing but it includes careful listening to God and joyful sub-

mission to his Word.

Part of necessary flexibility and spiritual sensitivity is our willingness to experiment, always seeking the best. Rather than worship and singing always preceding the preaching of God's Word, there is equal place for it following the preaching as part of our response to it. The way forward is to demonstrate preaching's relevance in different ways. For example, we may change the place of teaching and preaching in a service, or provide opportunities on a regular, if occasional basis, for questions concerning what has been taught and preached.

The way forward is to recognise the challenge the present climate represents, and to pray and fight against our spiritual enemy. We must not spend our time bemoaning the situation, but rather put on the whole spiritual armour God provides—and then use the key weapons of the sword of the Spirit and prayer. The weapons—plus the armour—are sufficient!

*Historical Sermons*

# The Joyful Approach of the Saviour

## Cheerfully welcomed by the Church's Echo of Faith

A sermon by Ralph Erskine, preached on 27th April 1734 in

Abernethy at Service of Preparation for Holy Communion

**W**e have a solemn communion in view. But if the question be proposed, 'How shall we have communion with God at this occasion?' two things are necessary to it. First, his coming to us graciously. There is no communion with him to be expected, unless he come. Second, our apprehending his approach, and giving him welcome entertainment upon his coming. Then, and not till then, have we communion with God, when we hear his voice, and see him, as it were, on the tops of the mountains, and say, 'The voice of my Beloved! behold, he cometh!'

Doctrine: Christ's coming to his people graciously, in their time of need, is a joyful and delectable coming, both to him and to them.

### **What comings of Christ to his people are joyful to him & to them**

1. His coming in the flesh was a joyful coming, both to him and his people. The first text is particularly applied to

'Lo, I come!' (Psalm 40:7)

'The voice of my Beloved!

behold, he cometh.'

(Song of Solomon 2:8)

his coming in the flesh: 'Sacrifice and offering thou wouldest not, but a body hast thou prepared me; then I said, Lo, I come, to do thy will, O God' (Heb. 10:5, 7). Which also shows this was a joyful and delightful coming, though it was upon that errand of being a sacrifice to divine justice for our sins, when no other sacrifice would do.

Surely this coming of Christ is a joyful coming to his people, and brings ground of joy to all people. 'Behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which shall be to all people....' said the angels to the shepherds upon Christ's coming in the flesh. The Old

Testament saints saw his day afar off, and rejoiced in the view they had of it by faith. They saw him coming, skipping on the dark mountains of shadows, ceremonies and typical sacrifices—to be the substance of all the shadows.

In a word, his coming in the flesh is the very root and foundation of the joys of all the redeemed. If he had not thus come, according to the promise, they would have never had any ground of joy. But faith's view of his coming, or of God in our nature, 'God made manifest in the flesh', is a fountain-head of joy; 'God, being in Christ, reconciling the world to Himself'; being bone of our bone, and flesh of our flesh; we having access to God through him, who became like unto us in all things, except sin.

O sirs, do you believe there is a Man in heaven called Immanuel, God-Man? We read of joy and peace in believing. Surely, surely you never believed there was such a Man, God in our flesh, if it



never afforded any joyful thought to you.

2. His coming in the clouds is a joyful coming, both to him and to his people. 'To them that look for him, shall he appear the second time, without sin unto salvation' (Heb. 9:28). And, indeed, this will be a joyful coming of Christ, for it is a coming to salvation. When he comes to save, he comes always joyfully; much more when he comes to finish the work of salvation, and to perfect the salvation of all the redeemed.

Christ had an eye to this in his coming to suffer: 'he endured the cross, and despised the shame, for the joy that was set before Him' (Heb. 12:2), even to the joy of an exalted state. You know that the last step of his exaltation is his coming to judge the world at the last day. Then he will be glorified in his saints, and admired in all them that believe.

It is true, it will be terrible to his enemies that slighted his coming to save, and neglected the great salvation. For, 'He will come in flaming fire, taking vengeance on them that know not God, and obey not the Gospel' (2 Thes. 1:8). His second coming will be dreadful to them that do not welcome his first coming. 'Behold, he cometh with clouds, and every eye shall see him, and they also that pierced him, and all kindreds of the earth shall wail because of him' (Rev. 1:7).

To his people, to all that welcome him now, his second coming is joyful; they will welcome him with joy, saying, 'Even so, come, Lord Jesus'. They long for his coming and they are called to lift up their heads with joy, because the day of their redemption draweth nigh.

3. His coming in the Word, to court a people for Himself, is a joyful coming to him and to his people; for then, 'The Spirit and the Bride say, Come'. The Spirit of Christ, and the bride of Christ, joyfully invite sinners to come to Christ. Hence a gospel day is called the day of the Son of Man. In the gospel dispensation, he says, 'Lo, I come!'

He comes riding in the gospel

chariot; he comes with outstretched arms, saying, 'Behold me! Behold me!' His coming is joyful to all his people. 'How beautiful are the feet of them that preach the gospel of peace, and bring glad tidings of good things!' (Rom. 10:15). His coming in the Word is joyful to them, in so much, that nothing in the world is so precious to them as the Word; it is sweeter than honey and the honeycomb.

This is their food: 'Man doth not live by bread only, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of the Lord'. This is their comfort in their afflictions: his Word quickens them; they hear his voice therein and say, 'It is the voice of my Beloved! behold he cometh, leaping upon the mountains, skipping upon the hills'. His coming in the Word is joyful and beneficial, as it is attended with what follows, namely, his coming in the Spirit. Thus,

4. His coming in the Spirit is a joyful coming; and this is that which makes all the former ways of his coming to be joyful. We have no joyful view of his coming in the flesh, nor joyful hope of his coming in the clouds, nor joyful apprehension of his coming in the Word, unless we have some share of his coming in the Spirit, as a Spirit of faith and consolation. His coming in the Spirit not only to court, but to win the heart; not only to deal, but to prevail with sinners, by his convincing and converting power.

This day is joyful to him, for it is a day of the gladness of his heart: for then he sees of the travail of his soul and is satisfied (Isa. 53:11). And, O this should encourage us to pray for the Spirit, the promised Comforter, since nothing gladdens the heart of Christ more than the giving of the Spirit to convince of sin, righteousness and judgement and so to comfort his people.

On the other hand, this coming of Christ in the Spirit cannot but be a joyful coming to his people; for then they are anointed with the oil of gladness, and get the oil of joy for mourning, and the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness. Then they get their bands loosed; their maladies

healed; their doubts resolved; their fears dispelled.

When Christ says here, 'Lo, I come!' let us view therein the promise of his coming in the Spirit; for, why did he come in the flesh, but that he might come in the Spirit? Having come in the flesh, and finished his work, according to his Word, he promises the Spirit and sends the Spirit: 'He shall glorify me' (John 14:14). 'When the Comforter is come, whom I will send unto you from the Father, even the Spirit of truth, which proceedeth from the Father, he shall testify of me' (John 15:26).

O sirs, is this his voice? What say you to it? Is there any joyful echo in your heart, welcoming him, saying, 'The voice of my Beloved! behold, he cometh'. Surely, if he comes in the Spirit to you at this occasion, it will be a joyful coming.

#### **What makes his coming joyful to him**

1. His coming is joyful to him because he comes clothed with a commission from his Father, and he rejoices to run his errands. Therefore he says, 'I delight to do thy will, O my God'. 'This commandment have I received of my Father, to lay down my life for my sheep'. Therefore with desire he desired this passover, even to be Himself our Passover, sacrificed for us. He comes in his Father's name, and his Father's seal appended to his commission.

2. His coming is joyful to him because it is on a glorious design of glorifying the Father; and therefore, when he comes, he says, 'Now is the Son of Man glorified, and God is glorified in him' (John 13:31). 'I have glorified thee on earth, I have finished the work thou gavest me to do' (John 17:4). He brought in glory and honour to all the perfection of God, and full reparation to all his injured attributes.

3. His coming is joyful to him because he comes to save his people, and justify them, and sanctify them, and comfort them, and heal them, and help them, all for love. Because he has loved them with an everlasting love,

therefore he comes to draw them with loving kindness. It was love made him come joyfully in the flesh; and love makes him come joyfully in the Spirit.

### **What makes his coming joyful to his people**

1. Because his coming is their life. When he came in the flesh, 'He came that we might have life, and have more abundantly' (John 10:10). When he comes in the Spirit, he comes to give life, to give the well of water springing up into everlasting life (John 4:14). Whenever he comes, life enters the dead and dry bones. 'He that hath the Son hath life'. Whenever he comes, and we have him with us, then the life of faith, the life of repentance, the life of love, the life of joy, the life of humility, the life of holiness, and the life of comfort come; we live or die as he comes or goes.

2. His coming must be joyful to his people, because his absence is their death. Yea, his absence is a hell to them that know what a heaven his presence makes. They cannot live without him. Or, if his absence be to such a degree, as that they are careless, stupid and unconcerned, yet they know what his joyful presence is, and will grant that their careless times are their sad and sighing times.

When he is away from a church, nothing but confusion and disorders take place. But when he comes back, then his work is revived, Zion is built up, reformation restored. When he goes away from a particular believer, O what a hell of confusion till he returns! His presence gives rest, but his absence trouble. 'Thou didst hide thy face, and I was troubled'.

3. His coming is joyful to his people, because the errand on which he came is merciful. What does he bring when he comes? Why, he even brings God with him, and all the fullness of God. So he brings the chief good with him. When he comes graciously, he comes in the capacity of a Friend, to help; a Physician, to heal; a Shepherd, to feed. The effects of his coming are most joyful. For when he comes to his people, their sins are

pardoned, their wants supplied, their enemies conquered, their crosses sanctified, their kingdom secured. Therefore his coming must be joyful unto them.

### **First Question: How shall I know if ever he came thus to me?**

1. Were you ever made sensible of the dreadful distance between him and you; a dismal distance; a damnable distance; an invincible and insuperable distance? Have you seen an utter impossibility of saving yourself, unless the Lord had come to you? This is the Lord's ordinary way. When he brings to light, he makes sensible of darkness; when he brings to life, he makes sensible of deadness and lifelessness; when he brings to faith, he makes sensible of unbelief; when he brings to love, he makes sensible of enmity; when he brings to holiness, he makes sensible of wickedness; and when he brings to an acquaintance, he makes sensible of estrangement.

2. Have you heard his voice saying, 'Lo, I come!' Have you heard, not the voice of ministers only, but the voice of the chief Shepherd; and know it to be his voice, by the majesty of it, by the power that attended it, by the sweetness that was in it? Has the gospel come to you not in Word only, but in power (1 Thes. 1:5)? Were there such life, light, liberty and joy accompanying the voice, and made you sure at the time, that it was not the voice of man, but of God, who spake like Himself?

3. Have you seen him coming, and have you apprehended him by the light of the Spirit, revealing the Son in you? Have you seen his fullness, suitableness, and sweetness, his glory, worth and excellency, by a light shining not into the head only, but into the heart? It is a spiritual light; flesh and blood cannot reveal it; education and external revelation cannot contribute unto it, without supernatural revelation.

4. Have you joyfully welcomed a coming Jesus? saying, 'The voice of my Beloved! behold, he cometh'. Have you apprehended the mountains that were in the way between him and you, particularly the mountains of sin and

guilt? Is this your joy, that he came over all mountains, melted them down, and melted your heart also before him?

5. What are the fruits and effects of his coming? Beholding his glory, were you changed? Surely, if there were never a change wrought in you, but you remain as vain, frothy and carnal in your conversation and deportment as ever, he has not come to you. But has his coming embittered sin, and made you differ with yourself and submit to his righteousness for your justification, and to his holiness for your sanctification? His great errand is, like his name, Jesus, to save his people from their sins; from the guilt of sin, by his merit and righteousness; and from the power of sin, by his Spirit and grace. What joy has his coming raised in you?

### **Second Question: Are there any signs of his coming?**

1. It would be a sign of his coming if we were afflicted for his absence, saying, 'O that I knew where I might find him!' A longing desire after him, saying, 'O when wilt thou come?' He will satisfy the longing desire.

2. Another sign of his coming is, if we were seeking after him, and wrestling with him for the blessing. He is near to them that call upon him, and those who seek him shall find him.

3. If we were finding ourselves to have a name to which the promise opens a door of hope. Is there any hope of his coming for a poor insolvent bankrupt, who fears that the Word of the Lord is against him? Why, that man is in the promise: 'To this man will I look, even to him that is poor, and of a contrite spirit, and that trembleth at the Word of the Lord' (Isa. 66:2). Is there any hope of his coming to a poor needy creature, who can find no relief to its soul? Yes, 'When the poor and needy seek water, and there is none, I the Lord will hear them, I the God of Jacob will not forsake them'.

Well, sirs, what think you, will he not come to the feast? Have we no reason to think that he will come? Yea,

**CONTINUES ON PAGE 15**

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# The Joyful Approach of the Lord

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 9

I think we have. Why, it is a time of need among his poor people, and his throne of grace is erected for a time of need. Therefore, we are called to come boldly to it, that we may 'obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need'. It is a time of trouble and distress, and he is a present help in time of trouble, and a refuge for the oppressed. It is a

time wherein many of his people, from all corners, and I hope, many praying people, are met about his hand, and he has said, 'Where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst'.

Why, then, shall we not expect his coming, when at the same time, he is saying, 'Lo, I come!?' May faith's joyful

echo in our hearts say, 'The voice of my Beloved! behold, he cometh'!

*These sermon notes, taken verbatim from the original sermon, comprise less than one third (3000 words) of the sermon preached by Ralph Erskine (more than 10,000 words)—Editor.*

# Pastoral Issues Arising from CoHabitation

David Easton

**I**t is Vestry Hour. Enter a young couple who ask to be married in church this time next year. Her parents are members of the congregation, but he comes from another part of the city, and has no church connection. Pleasantries put them at their ease and pave the way for pertinent questions. How long have they known each other? Why, if not members of the church, do they wish a church wedding? Might this not be the time for them to start attending church to hear what the Christian faith has to say to them at this stage in their lives, if it is indeed Christian marriage

that they seek? Half an hour later, all bids fair for the chosen date in a year's time. The pen is poised to enter the date in the church diary, when it emerges that both live at the same address and have done so for the last year and a half. What follows that moment of disclosure is the theme of this article.

## A change in public attitudes

Time was when the admission was accompanied by a blush; now it is simply stated as a matter of fact. In the middle eighties a sociologist described cohabitation as 'a deviant phenomenon

rather than a social institution'; a decade further on, 56% of couples live together before their wedding. The growing incidence of cohabitation has inevitably led to a change in public attitudes. Parents, grandparents, and straight-laced aunts, who once strongly disapproved, now speak of 'having to move with the times', and the church, anxious not to alienate even further a generation it has already lost, talks about there being 'worse sins', if indeed living together is now a sin at all.

The couple sense that the fact they are living together has complicated matters. The minister has put down his pen. An enquiry follows into why they decided to live together.

The reasons vary. For many it makes economic sense; living together is cheaper than staying in separate accommodation. Others do so with a view to possible marriage. Either they are not free to marry because they are already married and are waiting for a divorce, or they see cohabitation as an experiment in living together. There are those too, who have shrunk from making the kind of commitment which marriage entails because they bear the scars of a failed marriage, either their own or their parents'. Some few, like militant feminists, reject marriage as an institution for ideological reasons. And a good number drift into living together for no reason other than that 'everybody does it'. How ought the minister to respond?

Oscar Wilde quipped that consistency is the last refuge of the unimaginative. Right enough, the rigid, though consistent, application of rules can be the easy solution to a knotty pastoral problem. Yet a minister in his dealings with people, particularly when it comes to requests for baptism and marriage, should act with a certain consistency, else his 'yes' and his 'no' will seem quite arbitrary, depending perhaps on who is involved. At the same time, no two pastoral situations are the same, and there may be times when it seems right to say 'yes' when in another context the answer would almost certainly be 'no'.

### **What marriage is**

Such decisions are not easily reached. The minister is torn between principle and expediency, fearing that he appear judgmental and lacking in compassion on the one hand, or too accommodating on the other. In deciding how to respond to a cohabiting couple's request to be married in church, we need to be clear in our minds what marriage is.

Over the years, there has been much discussion about what constitutes legitimate grounds for divorce, and whether those who have been

and wife. Is not Paul saying that intercourse creates a moral bond between a couple (in the particular context, an immoral bond into which no Christian should enter) while not attributing to the casual encounter a significance it cannot bear?

Surely the essence of marriage lies in the consent of both parties. This has been the traditional teaching of the church. Consummation does not of itself make the marriage; rather it is the proper consequence of that consent without which there can be no true marriage. It is the private ratification of

Common Order. Other orders put the matter less robustly. The Church of Scotland's Book of Common Order (1979) speaks of marriage as the 'happy and holy setting for the full expression of physical love'.

2. The upbringing of children

3. Mutual help and comfort

These three goods stem from the commitment which a man and woman make to one another in marriage.

### **Is cohabitation immoral?**

The question is: if a couple who cohabit exhibit the 'goods' and qualities of that commitment which is held to be at the core of marriage, is their relationship of itself immoral?

They most certainly will not have expressed their consent formally (though some may have approached a lawyer to help them draw up a form of contract with each other), but they may well have opened a joint bank account, rented or bought a house in both their names, and if they have a child, made sure that the father has full parental rights. In other words, their relationship is based on mutual consent, and they find in each other the same help and comfort which a husband and wife derive from a conventional marriage. It may be that when their relationship is tested and they are tempted to part, they may lack the encouragement to persevere which the formal consent given before a minister or a registrar provides. On the other hand, the high incidence of marriage breakdown suggests that the support given by the institution of marriage is in many cases minimal.

It may also be argued that those who cohabit lack the protection which the words 'let not man put asunder' provides against the prowling Romeo, the woman 'of crafty intent' about whom the writer of Proverbs warns, or for that matter, interfering parents. Yet a couple who live together may be faithful to one another, or more faithful, than a married couple. Their intention to remain together until 'death do us part' may be questioned, but the same is true of married couples as well. A poll taken some years ago

## ***Consummation of marriage is the private ratification of a commitment publicly made***

divorced may be remarried in church. But far less attention has been paid to what makes a marriage.

Some see marriage in terms of a legal ceremony, either in church before a minister, or in a registry office before a registrar. The ceremony makes the marriage and the marriage is identified with the ceremony. However, in Scotland, couples who cohabit may approach the Court of Session for a declaration that they are married 'by habit and repute'. A similar position existed in England prior to Lord Harwich's Act of 1753 by which common law marriage became invalid. In other words, there is in Scotland, and there was in England, the recognition that what makes a marriage is not just a legal ceremony. In the same vein, Emil Brunner argues that though the consent of the state, or the blessing of the church, may form part of marriage, in principle marriage is independent of either.<sup>1</sup>

Others have argued from 1 Corinthians 6:16 that marriage is effected through sexual intercourse. While it is the case that both the church and the state agree that an unconsummated marriage is no real marriage and may be declared null and void, it surely does not follow that the mere fact that a man and a woman have copulated makes them husband

and wife. But it is the commitment which a man and a woman make before witnesses to remain faithful to one another, both as sexual partners and in mutual support, until death do them part, which makes a marriage.

The context in which such consent occurs is briefly but fully spelt out in Genesis 2:24. Marriage is first exclusive ('a man...his wife'); secondly, publicly recognised ('a man will leave his father and mother'); thirdly, permanent ('united to his wife'); and fourthly, consummated by sexual intercourse ('and they will become one flesh'). The question is: how does cohabitation fit into this scheme of things?

The short answer may be that it does not fit at all. On the other hand, there may be some tie up which provides pointers as to how the problem should be handled pastorally. We need to ask if there are circumstances in which a couple who cohabit ought to be regarded as married from a moral and social point of view.

It was Augustine who first spelt out what traditionally have been called the 'goods' of Christian marriage. They are three, and are referred to in most marriage services.

1. 'The remedy against sin'. The phrase is Cranmer's in the Book of

revealed that 75% did not regard the marriage vows as binding.

What we are saying is that a relationship which may have begun as a casual affair, often moves on to exhibit the 'goods' of marriage, to the extent that to all intents and purposes the couple are married.

There is, however, one important respect in which marriage and cohabitation differ quite fundamentally. Cohabitation is a private arrangement with no legal standing (though it is not unknown for litigation to follow the split up of couples who have cohabited) whereas marriage is a public declaration which has the backing of the law. Those who are impatient with the legalities of getting married, whether in a registry office or a church, fail to see that their relationship is not just their business and no one else's, but is of wider concern. Brunner puts the matter thus:

The purely individualistic view of marriage involves a complete misunderstanding of the public and legal aspect of marriage. The civil official becomes a ridiculous figure, the interference of the state is regarded as a degradation of a union founded on love. As a reaction against an excessive emphasis upon the legal and social aspect of the question which formed part of the older tradition, this is quite intelligible; actually, however, the severance of marriage from the system of law and custom is wholly wrong. Marriage, sex relations in general, is a matter which concerns not merely the two interested parties themselves, but the community as a whole; for it is the source of the nation's power, to watch over which is the duty of the guardians of the common weal. This is self-evident, not only of the marriage which has become fruitful, but also of the potentially fruitful marriage. The nation must see to it that the well should not be poisoned, but also that it should not be stopped up.<sup>2</sup>

Given that cohabitation may in cases exhibit the 'goods' of marriage yet at the same time fall short of marriage in a very important respect, how should the church react to cohabitation?

### **The challenge to the Church**

Greg Foster, in his recent book, 'Cohabitation and Marriage' helpfully lists different types of cohabitation

## ***Research has shown that splitting up after living together is as painful as divorce after marriage for the same time***

based on the researches of sociologists.<sup>3</sup> They are: 1. Already married to some one else and not free to remarry until their divorce comes through.

2. Committed to one another but not persuaded that marriage is for them, either as a matter of principle, or because their previous experience of marriage has been unhappy.

3. Living together in order to find out if they are meant for each other.

4. Planning to get married but cohabiting in the period leading up to the wedding.

5. Drifted into living together.

In the first case, where one or both partners are already married, it would be wrong for them to be married in church if their relationship was the cause of the breakup of the first marriage, though it may be desirable that their relationship be regularised in a registry office.

Where, as in the second case, the couple, though clearly committed to one another, do not wish to be married for reasons which for them are conclusive, patient persuasion and pastoral care are needed to lead them to a more positive view of marriage. If, in time, they have a change of heart and consent to marriage, would it be right for the church to refuse to marry them after having encouraged them along the road to marriage?

Those for whom cohabitation is an experiment in living together argue that theirs is the responsible approach

to marriage, allowing opportunity for each to check the other out for compatibility, no strings attached, with the freedom to separate should the relationship not work. However, research has shown that splitting up after living together is as painful as divorce after marriage for the same time. In any case, the argument for an exploratory relationship is flawed. The

logic of the theory, if not always the practice, leads to an unending series of experiments. Even if each partner were better than the last, how does the serious experimenter know when he or she has reached the point when it can be said without hesitation, 'This is the one for me!'? Somewhere there might just be someone else who might prove even better? Besides, couples who live together as an experiment can never experience fully what it is like to be married for the simple reason that two of the integral components of marriage, a total commitment to and an unconditional acceptance of each other, is missing.

The fourth category is undoubtedly the most common. From a Christian point of view, cohabiting couples, in consummating their relationship before marriage, miss the dimension which waiting until the appropriate time adds to their union. Scripture calls for continence prior to the marriage ceremony. This is illustrated in the behaviour of Joseph who, though he was more in the position of a husband to Mary than a fiancé, knew that it was entirely improper of him to act as a husband towards her until the proper time for consummation had arrived. Cohabitation misses out on what has been described as 'the wonder of an awaited consummation'.<sup>4</sup>

### **Integrity and sensitivity**

Is there a way of handling the situation

which preserves the integrity of Christian marriage and the church on the one hand, and at the same time shows sensitivity towards those whose relationship, while falling short of the Christian ideal, displays some of those qualities which are the making of a good marriage?

There are ministers who marry couples on demand, arguing that cohabitation is no longer the exception, and that unless the church is prepared to turn away most couples who ask to be married in church, then it has little option but to accept with good grace that in society today cohabitation is the normal prelude to marriage. Living together should no longer be seen as an impediment to marriage in church. This was the argument of the Convener of the Church of Scotland's Panel on Doctrine when he presented the Panel's Report on the Theology of Marriage to this year's General Assembly. The Report went further, suggesting that cohabitation should not necessarily be seen as a matter for 'contrition, repentance, and change'.

Such a view compromises the integrity of both the church and the couple. Of the church, because if couples who have cohabited are married in church as a matter of course, their families and friends who attend the wedding may be forgiven for concluding that it does not matter whether a couple remain apart or live together before the wedding, since there is nothing in the service to

the promise of his grace for the future, is reduced to a backdrop which lends the colour, sentiment, and dignity of a religious ceremony (as opposed to the matter-of-fact formalities undergone with little sense of occasion in the often drab surroundings of a registry office) to the public affirmation of their relationship. In other words, they have been allowed, even encouraged, to use the church, and if the justification is that the occasion presents an 'evangelical opportunity' which the church should not let slip, then is it not strange that the notes of the gospel (the demand for repentance, the offer of forgiveness, and the promise of a fresh beginning) should not be sounded at the service with the couples' understanding and approval?

That said, the practice of declaring at the start of the wedding service that the couple, having repented of a life-style which was contrary to the teaching of God's Word, now wish to put right what was wrong, smacks of the penitent stool. A public wedding service is not the place for confession and expression of penitence. Where repentance is required in order that the couple do not carry over into their marriage the guilt of the past, whether freely acknowledged or denied, the matter is best dealt with by the minister in private.

#### ***A legacy of guilt***

The fact is that most couples, whether they have cohabited or not, bring to their marriage a legacy of guilt. A

2000 engaged couples, found that only 2% of women and 3% of men are virgins when they marry. Few indeed come to their wedding day without a history of previous relationships; and even those who have not crossed the boundaries drawn by faith or upbringing, (though they were often tempted to do so, and agonised over how far they could go without actually trespassing onto forbidden territory, drawing back, only to wonder if they might not venture just a little further without actually stepping across), can take little pride in their chastity. For them it is more often the product of taboos, fears, and plain ignorance than a convinced and joyous acceptance of God's good and wise order for the sexes.

In the current climate of sexual morality, it would seem unfair to require of couples who have cohabited what amounts to a public act of penitence. If cohabitation, then why not previous relationships also, or the fact that the couple have slept together before their wedding day? Yet it would be inept to use a form of service which did not reflect where the couple have come from. Members of their families and friends who are present will know their history, and it is important for the integrity of the occasion that a form of words is used in the preamble to the vows and in the prayers, which, while not elaborating the circumstances surrounding the marriage, or alluding darkly to the couple's past in a manner which implies condemnation, nevertheless enables the gathered company to read their own knowledge of the couple into what is said. The standard orders of service are not much help here, and much careful thought and sensitivity is required in drawing up a suitable form of words. Indeed, in the light of the fact that chastity before marriage is very much the exception nowadays, there is need for an order of service which sets forth the Christian ideal of marriage in the context of contemporary reality.

#### ***A wedding with all the frills***

To return to the couple with whom

## ***A public wedding service is not the place for confession and expression of penitence***

suggest that the couples' life-style before the wedding has been out of step with those ideals which Christian marriage enshrines; and of the couple, because if there is no recognition on their part that their relationship has fallen short of God's ideal for men and women, then the marriage service, far from signalling a new start which rests on God's forgiveness for the past and

profile of the average bride-to-be published by the magazine, 'Brides and Setting Up Home', based on a survey of 700 readers, revealed that more than 90% are sexually experienced. She is aged 24, and has had four partners since losing her virginity at the age of 17. The average groom is 26 and has had five sexual partners. 'Home and Wedding' magazine, in a survey of

this article began. They wish to be married in a year's time. That presents a problem. Matters would be more straightforward if, recognising that cohabitation fell short of the ideal, and that the sooner they put their relationship on to a proper footing the better, they asked to get married as soon as possible. But the long interval between their decision to marry and the fulfilment of that intention suggests a less than compelling desire to make a new start with God's blessing, particularly when they will continue to live together until the wedding. One is reminded of St Augustine's prayer; 'Give me chastity and continency, but do not give it yet!'

The couple explain that they wish to have a big wedding, and need to give themselves time to save for the occasion. On other occasions, I have found that the couple themselves are happy to marry soon with minimum expense, but their parents, anxious not to lose face in their social circle, insist on a wedding with all the frills (what a fellow minister once described as 'a great excess') which nowadays may cost over £8000.

In such circumstances, should the couple be asked to live apart until the wedding as a sign of good faith, given that there are no children, when separation would surely be out of place? In my experience, that suggestion has never been taken up on the grounds that if they separated, one of them would be homeless, or it would not make economic sense, or more candidly, they did not see that there was anything particularly wrong with living together in any case. My response has been to say that if they do not see any incongruity between their present lifestyle and the ideals for which Christian marriage stands, and if they are not willing to bring the wedding forward, whatever the difficulties, as a token of their sincerity in wanting God's blessing on their relationship, then it would be better if they went to the registry office where they could be married without the hypocrisy of paying lip-service to an ideal of marriage with which they do not hold.

### Angry response

Ministers who take this line must be prepared for an angry response, not only from the couple, but also from the parents, who, while often unhappy that their son or daughter is cohabiting, nevertheless become fiercely defensive of them if the minister is seen to be closing the door to a church wedding. It is important that the minister visit them if they are members of his congregation or live in the parish to explain his or her position, (which has probably been misrepresented), to outline the parameters within which

bring the wedding forward from this time next year to the earliest possible date (and it is not suggested that they live apart for the next month or so) or to live apart until the wedding in a year's time as a token of their good faith and integrity. But, like the rich young ruler in the gospels, they go away sorrowful. They promise to think over what the minister has said, and he, for his part says that he will be happy to discuss matters further with them at any time. But somehow he does not expect to see them again. A week or two later will come a phone call or the

***One is reminded of St Augustine's prayer:  
'Give me chastity and continency, but do not  
give it yet'***

he or she would have been willing to marry the couple, and to express regret that he cannot be of help since the couple do not feel able, either to bring their wedding forward, or to separate until the day of the wedding. The visit will be difficult. In an often fraught atmosphere, it is unlikely that the family will respond positively to his carefully stated position, but the visit is a necessary exercise in damage limitation. As one father said to me as he showed me out the door, having calmed down a little after telling me in no uncertain terms what he thought of me and the church: 'I totally disagree with you, but it was good of you to come and see us.'

The couple leave the vestry. The minister has listened sympathetically to their story. Their circumstances have been fully discussed, and great care has been taken to avoid judgmental comments. The perspectives of what the Christian faith affirms about relationships between the sexes have been brought to bear on their situation, and God's word of grace to those who do not measure up (which includes us all) has been affirmed. Finally, after assurances that it is indeed Christian marriage that they seek, the options have been put to them: to

briefest of letters saying that they do not wish to take the matter of the wedding further, since they have found a minister who is more than happy to marry them in his church on the date they have chosen. Not long after her parents transfer their 'lines' to another church.

### Rights and wrongs

That night he lies in bed wondering about the rights and wrongs of the situation. If he was willing to marry them if they consented to a wedding in a few week's time, without making it a condition that they meantime live separately, accepting instead their readiness to bring the wedding forward as a sign of good faith, should he not have been willing to marry them in a year's time, no strings attached? By what logic was a church wedding in a month's time alright, but a church wedding in a year's time out of the question? Was the condition that they live apart if the wedding was to take place in a year's time, a necessary test of good faith on their part; or was it more a salve to his own conscience in a situation of compromise? How much easier it would be, he reflects, to turn a blind eye to cohabitation, like his colleague in the next parish, or to



adopt a rigorous, hard and fast policy like others he knows whose stance reminds him of the notice in the window of the corner shop: 'Don't ask for credit since refusal might cause offence'. Yet he cannot be happy with either response. 'Is there a 'right' response?', he asks himself. How can he at one and the same time hold up before couples the Christian ideal

have sought to bring their children up in the fear and admonition of the Lord, now agonise over the issue. What happens when their son brings home the girl he has been living with for some time? Are they given separate bedrooms ('not under my roof!', decrees father), or are the realities of the situation recognised and the couple given a bedroom to share?

ambiguities which cohabitation presents, or who question their relevance and see the issue simply as a matter of 'living in sin', will misunderstand, and those who seek to take account of the complexities of a live-in relationship will be open to the charge of compromise, whether perceived or real. Enabling people to hear both God's word of judgment and of grace is no easy matter, as Paul himself admits: 'Who is equal to such a task?' (2 Cor. 2:16). But that is the task of preaching and of pastoral care, and we cannot shirk it, not least when a couple who are living together come to Vestry Hour to book their wedding in church.

## *Enabling people to hear both God's word of judgment and of grace is no easy matter*

which stands in sharp distinction to their life-style, and at the same time affirm those qualities in their relationship which correspond to the ideal instead of condemn it for what it lacks? 'How would Jesus have gone about it?', he wonders, as he drifts off into a troubled sleep.

Whatever the ambiguities of the situation, one thing is certain. Next week or the week after another couple will come to Vestry Hour with the same request. The problem will not go away. Nor may we, as happened in the past, label those who cohabit as promiscuous or bohemian, thus placing them beyond the pale of the Christian community where such behaviour never occurs. Christian parents who

Such practical problems have a way of concentrating the mind wonderfully on some theological and moral issues which this article has raised. There are no cut and dried answers. At a time when the boundaries between right and wrong, particularly in the realm of sexual morality, have been moved, if not removed altogether, the church must not add to the uncertainty and confusion by sending out ambivalent signals which have the effect of undermining Christian morality and weakening the place of marriage. At the same time, the church has to meet people where they are; not where it would like them to be, but precisely where they happen to be. To do so is risky. Those who are unaware of the

### Notes

- 1 Emil Brunner, *The Divine Imperative* Lutterworth Press, 1937, p. 359.
- 2 *Ibid.*, p. 358.
- 3 Greg Foster, *Cohabitation and Marriage, A Pastoral Response* Marshall Pickering, 1994, p. 99f.
- 4 John White, *Eros Defiled* IVP, 1977, p. 50f.

# Who was David's Mother?

David Searle

Reading through the books of Samuel, Kings and Chronicles, one tends to become a little hazy over the complex relationships between some of the characters who feature in David's story. There are, for example, the three sons of Zeruiah—Joab, Abishai and Asahel.<sup>1</sup> And there is Amasa, the son of Abigail (Zeruiah's sister), whom Absalom, when he rebelled, appointed general of the army in place of Joab.<sup>2</sup> But these four men, remember, were nephews of David, as their mothers, Zeruiah and Abigail, were David's sisters.<sup>3</sup>

So far, so good. David's mighty men, captains of his victorious armies, were his nephews. But the complications begin when we read that Abigail was also a daughter of Nahash, (presumably) the Ammonite king:

Absalom had appointed Amasa over the army in place of Joab. Amasa was the son of a man named Jether, an Israelite who

had married Abigail, the daughter of Nahash and sister of Zeruiah the mother of Joab (2 Sam. 17:25).

What then was David's relationship to Nahash, if his sister Abigail was the daughter of Nahash?

I talked to an Israeli friend about the problem. Jack was born and bred in Israel, a Jew who knows the Old Testament Scriptures as well, if not better, than most European theologians. I suggested to him that there were strands of evidence that David's mother had been either a concubine or wife of Nahash the Ammonite, and he agreed with me.

'Our European Old Testament scholars say that 2 Samuel 17:25 is probably a corrupt text. What do the present day rabbis say to that?' I asked. Jack told me that they didn't like the suggestion at all that David had Ammonite links, and got out of it the same way as European scholars by

arguing that the original Hebrew had been changed at some point. They preferred to remove the name of Nahash altogether from 2 Samuel 17:25.

But consider other strands of the story which might be understood as pointing to some link between Nahash the Magnificent and David's mother.

## The feud

First, there is the character of the nephews, as men who were more warlike and bloodthirsty than the Hebrew usually was. David himself shared that propensity for war, even excelling his nephews in military genius, but he also had a gentle and peace-loving side to his character. 'What do you and I have in common, you sons of Zeruiah?' he angrily asked Abishai who wanted to kill Shimei in cold blood.<sup>4</sup>

These cousins were deeply into feuds, carrying grudges for years until they at last found the opportunity to

avenge a brother's death. David himself deplored this cruel feuding.<sup>5</sup> His lament for Abner, victim of the feud, (through no fault of his own—he had killed Asahel in self-defence), is very moving. The contrast between him and his nephews is brought out by the final words of the account of the assassination: 'These sons of Zeruiah are too strong for me. May the Lord repay the evildoer according to his evil deeds' (2 Sam. 3:39).

### **Nahash's kindness to David**

'In the course of time, Nahash king of the Ammonites died, and his son succeeded him as king. David thought, "I will show kindness to Hanun son of Nahash, because his father showed kindness to me"' (2 Sam. 10:1f. = 1 Chr. 19:1f.). The word used is *hesed*, covenant love.

The conjecture is that since Saul had roundly defeated Nahash as the first warlike act of his reign,<sup>6</sup> when David became a fugitive in the area of Adullam, he and Nahash made common cause on account of their mutual hostility to Saul. David, therefore, must have made the occasional visit to Ammonite territory where he was kindly received by Nahash. Hence the *hesed*.

The problem with that conjecture is that there is no account of any such relationship developing between David and Nahash. Why the silence? Some relationship between these two was undoubtedly there. Could it be that the relationship was one that the chroniclers preferred to avoid, because it was a link through David's mother who had at some time in her younger days been a member of Nahash's harem?

### **David ignored by his father**

Consider the rather surprising story of the anointing of David by Samuel<sup>7</sup> when Samuel calls for Jesse's sons. We have traditionally understood Jesse's ignoring of David to have been on account of his age. The other brothers were fully grown men, three of them in Saul's army at that. David was still a youth, whose role in the war with the

Philistines was merely to take some supplies to his three soldier-brothers.<sup>8</sup>

But just say there was another reason for Jesse's passing over David when Samuel called for his sons. Just say it was reluctance on Jesse's part because he was painfully aware that this youngest son was the result of an indiscretion on his part, bringing a woman into his family who had had an earlier liaison with a foreign king who had been hostile to Israel?

Might that make David something of an oddity in the family? Might it throw some light on the antagonism of his oldest brother Eliab towards him when he saw him in the army camp, and called him 'conceited' and 'wicked'?<sup>9</sup> Eliab used strong language, and we are told that he burned with anger. Is this yet another piece of a jigsaw puzzle whose pieces come together to show a shepherd boy who was rather different to his brothers, because his mother was different. And the jealousy was already there because David's mother was so different from Jesse's other wife (or wives), being strikingly beautiful and gifted (which was why she had been a partner of the Ammonite king)?

### **David's unique gifts**

This is the last piece of the puzzle. There is no doubt about it, David, youngest son of Jesse of Bethlehem, was a remarkable man. His gifts were quite outstanding. Theologian, poet,

#### **Comment on this article:**

'It is possible the observations in the article are correct. A reasonable case is presented, though on the basis of the arguments put forward, it is not conclusive. Other possibilities exist. It is possible that only Zeruiah and Abigail are the children of the unnamed wife or concubine of Nahash (so Baldwin in Tyndale Commentary and Anderson in Word series). It is also possible that Jesse may have been known as Nahash.'

*Dr Desmond Alexander,  
Queen's University, Belfast*

shepherd, fighter, general, leader and with a love for exquisite women into the bargain. Could a vital element in his make-up be that David's mother was not the mother of his seven brothers?

Is one of the greatest messages of David's life something that we have missed for generations, simply because ancient chroniclers did not want to admit openly that his very existence was the result of an old man's foolish liaison with a dubious woman? What might that message be? Simply that God delights to take up the rejects of society, the pieces of shrapnel from wrecked relationships, and transform them by his grace into instruments of his glory.

(I have wondered whether David's words in Psalm 51:5 regarding his conception 'in sinfulness' might not refer to his father's sinful relationship with his mother. But it is only a thought).

If David's mother was a Hebrew woman whose reputation was distinctly tarnished by her past sexual associations, but whom Jesse took in, then we have an instance of the hand of God at work that ought to be a massive encouragement to believers on at least two levels.

First, that God can turn the unhappiest and most unadvised of events to his own purposes.

Second, that those whose past has been marred by the jagged fragments of human folly can be redeemed and transformed to become men and women after God's own heart.

This is, after all, the very centre and soul of the Gospel!

#### **Notes**

- 1 2 Samuel 2:18; 1 Chronicles 2:16b.
- 2 2 Samuel 17:25; 1 Chronicles 2:17; 2 Samuel 19:3.
- 3 1 Chronicles 2:16a.
- 4 2 Samuel 19:21f.
- 5 2 Samuel 2:18–28; 3:22–39.
- 6 1 Samuel 11.
- 7 1 Samuel 16.
- 8 1 Samuel 17:17f.
- 9 1 Samuel 17:28.

# Ann Allen meets

Chris Park has been minister of St Ninian's Ferguslie since 1981. Ferguslie is a peripheral housing estate in Paisley designated as an Urban Priority Area (U.P.A.).

**Chris, how did you find yourself, a middle-class English grammar school product, called to work in an area like Ferguslie?**

Right from the first I had felt drawn to extension work. Maybe it was a kind of romantic visionary idealism in me, a strange ambivalence of apprehension and attraction, but because of that sense of calling I applied to work as an associate in Wester Hailes after my assistantship in St Machar's Aberdeen.

**20 years ago Wester Hailes was a much more mixed and stable community than it is today; so was your time there formative for your ministry in Ferguslie?**

I learned an enormous amount there from the people and from the ministry, but I was still unprepared in many ways for the situation I came to in St Ninians and realised that notwithstanding my basic convictions about ministry and church growth, I would have to start with a fairly clean and empty sheet.

**Why do you think the church struggles to survive in the peripheral housing areas of Scotland?**

It took me quite a long time to identify the problems. After all it's not as if there are no evangelicals working in U.P.A. parishes. God is the same, the



gospel is the same, the people are the same, and like many evangelicals I balked at looking at the social and cultural issues and all that kind of jargon. However I realised that the cultural dynamics were vitally important if I was to be able to meet the living issues and seek under God to develop a church life that was relevant and responsive to these issues.

**What have you found to be the main characteristics of the culture here to which you have responded?**

I think I would zero in on three features. Low self-esteem, community culture and dependency. There is a widespread sense of inferiority. Forces at work within the community and attitudes of the media and the outside world often label and stereotype people here. Depression often seems to be endemic and difficulties in the realms of employment, housing and education compound the sense of low self worth. As for community, this can

be idealised and does break down, but folk here function as 'group members' and generally speaking don't tick as individuals. There is tremendous strength in that, in times of crisis, but it also throws up terrific barriers to the gospel because people are unused to making individual choices. In saying 'yes' to Christ, a person may be having to say 'no' to the community. Dependency is centred on the Giro arriving, the doctor, the social worker, the housing authority. These are the forces which come in and shape the lives of people here and sadly the church was seen as yet another outside force, at best as an arm of the Social Work Department, here to help folk, not for people to become part of.

**Faced with this kind of community, how did you go about shaping your ministry?**

I like to think that God speaks by his Spirit through his Word, and that what he says is the same, but he speaks in different dialects and in different vocabulary according to different cultures. If you like, God clothes the gospel in the native dress of the people. So I reckon the driving force of my ministry has been to find ways in which to present and clothe the gospel so that it is accessible and meaningful to the people.

**And you have obviously had some success because you have a living fellowship of committed people here—so how would you describe the main features of the church.**

# Chris Park

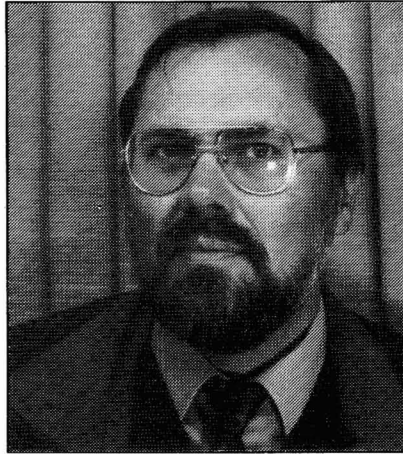
Acceptance has to be the key word. 'The church is not for the likes of us' was the barrier that had to be broken down. Folk genuinely did not come because they had no decent clothes, no clean shirt, no money for the collection, or they had a drink problem. We had to be a genuinely caring and accepting community in the church.

**But isn't the most difficult step, the first one, to get people over the door of the church. How did that happen?** Initially it was through the witness of a woman, an alcoholic, who had been wonderfully converted. She came along and, along with others, began sharing her faith in folk's homes, often alcoholics also. Thus complete outsiders were reached and began to come along. So at first people were contacted through pastoral outreach and personal witness.

**Didn't the stalwarts of the church who were long-standing, faithful members find it difficult to accommodate such new folk?**

There were a lot of difficult adjustments to be made on the part of the members. They had known Ferguslie as a respectable hard working area. They had fought against vandalism and deterioration in the church and now were being asked to welcome in those they might have thought of as 'enemies' previously. God resolved that in time, and we are, I think, an open accepting fellowship.

**Has there been a tension for you to**



**resolve between the all important need for acceptance and upholding and affirming biblical morality?**

Very much so. This has to be one of the most difficult areas. I have tried not to be heavy handed and say 'This is wrong in the sight of God and must stop!' but rather wait and pray that as people grow in Christ they will recognise that there are things they cannot go on doing if they are to please God. Cohabitation is the most difficult area. 95% of established couples here will not be married. I wish the panel on doctrine had had something more to say to clarify the biblical issues around marriage! In terms of biblical ethics I have erred on the side of the spirit of the relationship rather than holding to strict legalism, but I do insist that a couple be legally married before formally joining the church. We have seen some wonderful examples of people setting their lives in order as they come to understand the love of the Lord more fully.

**Some people say that one reason U.P.A. churches really struggle is because of lack of leadership. How would you respond to that?**

Very early on in the ministry I tried to give people tasks and responsibilities. It's a tremendous thrill to see people begin to believe in themselves and grow in their sense of worth, and clearly this does affect the way I preach. I don't emphasise our unworthiness. 'The worms of the earth' vocabulary does not feature largely here, the focus is much more that we are precious in the sight of God. One of the favourite choruses of the folk is 'Jesus take me as I am' which speaks very deeply to them of the acceptance we find in Christ.

**If the community spirit is so strong in Ferguslie, have you found that the church community needs to be broken down into smaller units, like house groups?**

House groups have been a continuing and developing feature of our church life and that has fostered leadership. Some folk come into the church so fragile and broken that they need constant therapy and support and we need groups for that kind of intensive help. So we have had various groups over the years, a bit like Topsy, growing in all directions. An outreach, door to door group; a group for the semi-housebound; a bible study group which perhaps never found quite the right level; a group for fellowship and prayer; and currently an 'Issues' group where more mature Christians, some

of whom have completed the TLS course at St Colms, want to look at controversial, difficult areas.

**I think it's exciting that you have been able to be so flexible and unafraid to try new things and to stop ventures when their usefulness is gone. Most of us are firmly set in tramline ministry! Do you see change as being integral in the church community?**

Long term ventures don't really work here. Short term strategy and spontaneity is better. You have to catch the enthusiasm of the moment and build on it. I am helped by Paul's metaphor in 1 Corinthians 3 of the church as a field. The model of the church as a building can be too static. Neither do I see the church as an alternative community to the world. That is far too negative and rejects the positives the world can offer us. But when I understand the church as God's field, going through seasonal changes, then I am helped to be positive about change and comings and goings.

**Talking about comings and goings, have you found that when folk are converted, they become upwardly mobile and leave the area?**

No. We have seen very little of that. On the contrary we have found a tremendous commitment to the church from the folk and from some who have come to work in the area. The comings and goings have been because of folk falling away. Perhaps we have tended to over emphasise the acceptance of Jesus at the expense of minimising the cost of the Christian life. Some people are drawn in and can't cope with the demands Christ's love makes and they are off. Or people are very brittle in relationships because of what they have been through and think 'here is an ideal Christian community where I will never be hurt again', and then hurt does come and instead of seeing the church as a school of forgiveness and this as an opportunity to be gracious, they feel betrayed and disillusioned and are off. I see them as the 'birds of the air who build their nests in our branches'. They

have gained something from the church, maybe a healed relationship or new confidence and God has in some measure enriched their lives.

**The pastoral demands in this parish are obviously enormous. How have you coped within yourself?**

With great difficulty! While we rejoice when folk are converted, we kind of hold our breath to see what kind of problems come with that person. If acceptance is genuine it has to be linked with real pastoral support and I have seen this as a very fulfilling way of using my time. Seeing growth in people is wonderful but to get there is very draining and you can get depressed yourself. That's part of the cost of incarnation. So I have had to learn disciplines and counselling skills and found the counselling course at the Tom Allan Centre tremendously beneficial. I learned to disentangle my own feelings, gained pastoral disciplines, found the way to say 'I feel with you but those are your feelings, not mine'. I was helped to understand paranoia and given the key to unlock pastoral relationships with difficult people.

**The other priority along with pastoring is preaching. Sunday worship is obviously the highlight of the week for the worshipping community. How have you structured your services and framed your teaching?**

In a depressed community, coming to worship should always be a celebration. So visually we make the church as attractive as possible with banners, children's art work and flowers. Music is very important and sometimes we sacrifice doctrinal content for the sake of a really joyful tune. I would describe my approach as 'person centred preaching'. I am aiming at accessibility and simplicity. I hope that this has not resulted in a superficial ministry. Luther said 'When I preach I speak to the humblest maid' and I go along with that. Literacy levels in Ferguslie can be very low. The structure of my sermon, about 20-25 minutes of exposition, would be outlined and printed every week. Some folk ask for

the outline if they have had to miss church. Comments like 'That was nice and simple, I could understand it' and 'I couldn't believe it, when you stopped I was just getting into it!' are very encouraging. I've found that the key to engaging people's minds is often through their emotions and am always eager to link spiritual truth with emotional reality to make the Scriptures live.

**Given what you have said about literacy and long term plans failing, how do you choose your material?**

Just now we are using Scripture Union SALT material. Folk here enjoy the visual and are very keen on participation. Sunday school children are very responsive. There are good ideas for complementing the sermon and we use an OHP and a white board as aids. There is a rich vein of humour in people here and that is a great grace.

**You obviously have not promoted a one man ministry—so how do you involve others in the services?**

Groups will sometimes plan and take the service. Others will lead in prayer, read, do the children's address. Using the gifts of the body is very much part of the life of our congregation. We love to get together for mini celebrations—any excuse to eat together is enthusiastically followed up.

**You mentioned prayer Chris. How have you fostered the prayer life of the congregation?**

On Wednesdays we have 'The Open Door' which is a mid week service followed by lunch together and preceded by 30 minutes of prayer. Then our Sunday evening services, which we call fellowship times, incorporate a time of prayer. We encourage spontaneity, and varied patterns and times of prayer giving people different opportunities to pray for the local issues and take up the burden for much wider topics as well.

**I sense that the blessings, growth and encouragements have far outweighed**  
*CONTINUES ON PAGE 28*

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## Ann Allen meets Chris Park

*CONTINUED FROM PAGE 20*

the cost for you over these last 13 years.

Very much so. I have come to understand that my very identity as Chris Park can only be found in this

group of people where God has placed me. It's not that the church is a group who join together for a common purpose and then detach and go their separate ways, but that I am only a complete Christian person as a part of a living fellowship.

Fortunate Ferguslie to have the ministry of such a man as Chris Park, moulded by God and continually malleable in the hands of his Holy Spirit.

# A Pastoral Perspective on the Problems of

**S**exuality is an inherent part of human nature with its own unique drive in mature and maturing adults. It is astonishing, therefore, that its legitimate sphere, as far as the Bible is concerned, is laid down as only within the confines of marriage—the joining of man and woman together in sexual union. This virtually excludes overt sexual experience as a relevant, moral subject for the celibate.

Freud and others have tried to show that sex increases human happiness, but an article in *The Times* in January 1993<sup>1</sup> said simply that sex results in great unhappiness as people vainly try to live up to the ideal. And when sex doesn't bring joy and pleasure, says Liz Hodgkinson in this article, we can start to blame and even hate the partner—or ourselves. She says:

Many people discover that their physical health improves during a time of voluntary celibacy. This is because sex brings into play a large amount of stress hormones, which can eventually lead to stress-related diseases. Although a life of celibacy is popularly

imagined to be one of misery, deprivation and continual frustration and repression, it can be the very opposite, and provide a wonderful opportunity to get to know yourself, understand who you are and what is your real purpose in life. It can also allow to develop hitherto undiscovered talents. A period of voluntary celibacy can give space and time to become autonomous and self-sufficient. It can bestow a powerful feeling of liberation and lightness. It means you can truly reclaim yourself, and become free from the sexual demands of your own body and also the sexual desires of other people, which you may not always feel like accommodating.

Well, are you wondering if you are reading aright? It's a change, you must agree, from most that we hear, read or

see about sex these days. Most evocative, if not provocative enough for a celibate (like myself) to gloat over it shockingly! Nonetheless, sex is undoubtedly a dominating factor in human life, directly and indirectly; it relates to, and affects, practically every sphere of adult life, so much so that any tampering with its potential in childhood is almost bound to have a deleterious effect upon growing children, and may injure the whole of their subsequent adult life.

## **The problems are legion**

One is obliged to ask, 'How are we to regard sexuality in its general effect on human life?' Some might suggest the answer is marriage. But even within

**William Still**

**our  
Fallen  
Sexuality**



marriage, its problems are legion, as every pastor will testify.

For example, withholding conjugal rights, for whatever reason—whether incompatibility, or because of undue sexual demands—can lead to such temptation to the other spouse towards unlawful extra-marital relations as to be a frequent source of sexual immorality. Therefore, to seek for sexual, as well as spiritual, moral, intellectual, and emotional, compatibility is a high responsibility in a world in which there

normal daily orbit—and bear in mind that many are often obliged to make do with the best available—this surely calls for nothing less than divine guidance from him who knows all.

#### **Divine canons**

In the midst of the infinite variety of the problems of sexual immorality, the canons of biblical guidance and restraint are such that, where they are acknowledged and observed, they limit the injury that can be inflicted on the

outlets and expressions than formerly.

#### **Spiritual and moral help**

Of course, all who have not found sexual compatibility in marriage need spiritual and moral help. The frustration of sexual desire is a major experience in any life, and there is no end to the forms of counsel which could be offered to persons in such situations. Certainly those who have known sexual satisfaction to some extent and then for some reason have been deprived of it, need very special help. They suffer such a profound loss that nothing but the understanding of a loving heavenly Father and his incarnate Son can assuage. The solution may be another lawful sexual union. It may also be commitment to a life of self-denial in which the good Lord is almost bound to provide some other direction for a now frustrated and unfulfilled urge.

When one thinks of the infinite possibilities of sexual maladjustment, it is of all things, the possibility of friendship with the Lord Jesus which is by far the greatest factor in finding solutions to such problems. Indeed, in these circumstances there can be few as comforting words as that which says, 'Like as a father pities his children, so the Lord pities them that fear him. For he knows our frame; he remembers that we are dust'.

It can only be the enemy of souls who keeps Christian people from giving whole-hearted attention to such a comforting promise. As in so much of the Christian life, peace and satisfaction are found in keeping the enemy and his nefarious tricks at bay to permit us to enjoy the Lord and his satisfactions, whatever other satisfactions may be withheld from us.

#### **Containment and re-direction**

That being the case, there is a sexuality which finds its exercise and fulfilment in what may be called re-direction, that is, not in physical sexual satisfaction as such. It must be said that, contrary to what some carnal spirits would allege, sexual containment is far from injurious to life, but can be a

### ***Certainly those who have known sexual satisfaction to some extent and then for some reason have been deprived of it, need very special help***

is such diversity of human nature.

In a fallen world, it is far from surprising that so many individuals either never find sexual harmony, or having found it, regard it so lightly that the sinful questing of their personality looks for extra-marital sexual experience. The result is inevitably the disordering of at least three lives, and often many more, especially where offspring are involved.

#### **Marriage breakdown**

The possibilities of sexual incompatibility or miss-alliance are so infinite that it would seem a miracle that any, or certainly many, should find complete harmony in marriage; hence sexual immorality must be one of the greatest moral problems known to man. The marvel is that so many do find sexual harmony and produce children, and that then these children themselves in turn find sexual compatibility within the lawful canons of biblical morality. Our concern in this article is with those who don't!

Even amongst professing Christians, advocates of Christianity, and the 'professionally religious', marriage breakdowns occur too frequently. If for the majority of souls there is a marital partner to be found within their

human personality. But that requires a high degree of both morality and spirituality.

To commit oneself wholly to Christ, for him to govern the totality of one's life, will mean that his help will be enlisted in, at least, damage limitation. A very great deal can be done in that sphere where the presence, help and comfort of the Lord is sought to achieve containment of one's sexual desires within the necessary restraints which need to govern distressing experiences of non-satisfaction.

It is in such situations that an involvement and encounter with the living Christ can make all the difference between the immoral ruin of a life which finds itself the victim of unhappy, unfulfilled sexual experience, or a life which finds approximate fulfilment and satisfaction within the constraints of happy sexual experience. A person who (for whatever reason) has been divorced, or bereaved of a spouse, is for a season (at least), deprived of sexual fulfilment. He or she needs special grace, as well as the prayers of sympathetic Christian friends, to prove the value of restraint under biblical laws. And to find, perhaps temporarily, a life-style in which the sexual drive finds other than sexual

blessing in disguise, because its drive may be re-directed towards other, higher satisfactions. The chiefest of those is the affection which should accompany all sexual experience, but which can be expressed ad infinitum where there is no possibility of physical sexual experience, yet where that affectionate regard which is the essence of good sexual relations can be expressed with absolutely no sexual arousal at all.

This is not to say that sexual feeling ceases to exist. Far from it. But it must be admitted that it thereafter takes a considerably lesser place in one's reckoning than formerly. Is this not a great advantage, providing at least a partial solution to sexual frustration? There is this other way! An alternative indeed, which *The Times* article, quoted above, discussed, and a way which the stormy sexual passions of the carnally demanding souls simply have not found.

And surely this is the way we must approach the problems of all who are sexually deprived, whatever their sexual problems may be.

Where that deprivation is within the marriage bond on account of the sinful withholding of lawful marital rights by one spouse from the other, study 1 Corinthians 7:3–7 to see what God says about mutual obligations. The limitation prescribed by the seventh commandment with regard to adultery, and the warnings in the pastoral Epistles with regard to continence within the marriage bond (1 Tim. 2:2–12; 5:9; Tit. 1:6), indicate that this frustration needs to be borne continentally within the realms of grace. Within those realms there are always such divine compensations as the goodness of God in his grace may be pleased to provide (e.g. 1 Sam. 1:8).

Fortunately, the Scriptures as indicated above are wonderfully explicit about problems within the marriage bond. Outside the marriage bond, however, it must be admitted that there is less help. Most of it is of a negative nature, which again is natural because outside the bonds of marriage the physical sexual urge clearly has no legiti-

mate area of expression. The highest which is offered is containment, or re-direction towards some other legitimate area of satisfaction and of affectionate service of others.

Perhaps the celibate lives of the heterosexual, bisexual or homosexual individual in a Christian and biblical context are basically not so very different from each other. Some kind of subliminal continence is surely the worthy goal, along with that patience which divine grace may afford, which looks to the Lord for any further relationships which might offer legitimate satisfactions.

#### **A marriage partner**

What might such further relationships be? For the heterosexual (and for the bisexual who with growing maturity may tend to lean toward the heterosexual side), there is always the possibility that the good Lord will provide a helpmeet.

For the homosexual and bisexual who on maturing find that there is still a leaning toward the homosexual side, the matter is not so easily solved. Indeed, let it never be thought that it is beyond the powers of the Almighty, by whatever means, to correct a preponderantly homosexual urge. Although such an urge can be, and often is, exceedingly deep-seated, it will take a

guidance of a loving heavenly Father. Nothing less can keep a person with a seemingly innate perverted sexual urge from seeking those opportunities for illegitimate satisfactions of which in our modern, godless society there are too many.

Hope is said to spring eternal in the human breast. It is natural for those disorientated sexually to long for sexual satisfaction. When with maturer years neither a legitimate solution to the problem, nor a radical or miracle cure of perverted feelings has been found, it may be necessary to conclude that it is the good Lord's will that life should be lived within that deprivation. Those faced with that prospect need to know clearly that grace will be given to bear the prohibition, lawfully and bravely, and that in God's kindness He will be pleased to provide some sort of alternative subliminal satisfaction. The legitimate affectionate outlets of a caring kind, for those deprived of sexual gratification, are endless, although such souls may well feel that even at best these are poor alternatives to that which is biblically forbidden.

#### **Biblical prohibitions challenged**

That the Scriptures are against homosexual practice there can be no doubt, and the conviction that this is true and

***contrary to what some carnal spirits would allege, sexual containment is far from injurious to life, but can be a blessing in disguise***

work of singular grace and power to dismantle and demolish the sexual feelings of years to replace them with heterosexual feelings.

#### **A loving Father**

Let it therefore now be stated, that, since we are evidently in realms of often excruciating personal spiritual and emotional agonies, it is imperative the sufferer seeks the constant comforting

right simply grows with every futile attempt made to re-interpret biblical statements in both Testaments to allow such practice. The growing trend of such re-interpretation seen in the work of men such as John Boswell, Robin Scroggs and William Countryman,<sup>2</sup> has had its effect on some within Scotland—witness the Church of Scotland's Panel on Doctrine Report to the 1994 General Assembly.

### **Pastoral Counselling**

The most important thing to do with any soul who is to any extent torn between natural and unnatural sexual desire is to try to help them discourage the unnatural, and chastely to increase and normalise whatever heterosexual inclinations they may have. That can take years! That is why we should never brand anyone irrevocably homo-

solved, and many pastors have seen how hopeless that can be. It all depends on the degree of bias towards one sex or the other. This situation generally needs to be pastorally monitored over a period of months and even years, to see where the bias eventually may lean. If it continues increasingly to be on the homosexual side, the worst possible advice would

condemn you; go, and sin no more', shows the perfect balance of Christ's attitude towards all sin, but with particular reference to sexual sin.

We must distinguish between the deliberate perversity of heterosexual sinners in experimenting with homosexuality purely for 'kicks', and the sins of those who grow up with, or are seduced into homosexual inclinations and acts which then become more natural to them than the natural. Such unnatural sins, whether committed by heterosexual experimenters, or by those hooked on homosexuality, can never be excused or exonerated, nor used to overturn the biblical stance (as some are increasingly seeking to do).

*That very drive which could have ruined them was used, when transmogrified into an instrument of God, as the means of saving and blessing many*

sexual under a certain age. We must give ample time under guidance to see whether with increasing maturity and the pursuance of natural sexual feelings they may be able to right themselves. Or at least to mortify the perverse element, if not extirpate it altogether.

A most encouraging fact is the number of men who, having passed through a seemingly homosexual stage, have emerged into heterosexuality sufficiently to contemplate marriage, and in marriage and family life have found a solution to their problem enough to make life tolerable and stable. It needs to be said, however, that homosexual feelings may still arise, especially in susceptible encounters. But by grace these experiences may be successfully mortified, so that normal married and family life goes on, whether the spouse knows about the other's problem or not. (Some women are able to cope with the knowledge of their husbands' tendencies. Whereas some can hardly bear to know about them at all. Of course, abhorrence can stem from an unrealistic and unwisely idealistic attitude towards the hazards of human life. We are all sinners, and pharisaical sinners are surely the worst. See Jesus about that!)

On the other hand, some have precipitately entered into marriage in the hope that their problem of disorientated sexuality would thereby be

be to marry! That has ruined many lives and broken the hearts of many men and women.

### **The Confirmed Homosexual**

Now turn to the confirmed homosexual. We must return to the basic fact that God hates what is unnatural, and nothing can make him change his mind about the abuse of the natural functions he has ordained for man as for his other creatures. That is why what is called 'unisex' is so abominable, and the desire of women to look like men and behave like men, and men to dress and develop natural characteristics such as excessive hair so as to look like and behave like a woman, is absolutely abhorrent to God and ought to be deplored by the godly.

This must be where we start, whoever may be hurt. But I want to appeal for a new degree of understanding. I have in view those who, through no fault of their own, are afflicted with perverse desires, and may be cruelly hounded to the point of suicide by a misguided use of the name of God and Christ. On their behalf, one must register a protest and complete condemnation of a judgmentalism which utterly ignores the infinite understanding of the holy Jesus, who, although he never excuses sin but must ever condemn it, always loves the sinner. 'Neither do I

### **Christian compassion**

In the interests of the compassion of Jesus Christ, there needs to be a far greater degree of understanding of why people do these things, however rightly disapproving we must be of their acts. Jesus' understanding of the woman of Samaria, the woman taken in adultery and Zacchaeus (a very different case), shows us how sad it is that in biblical, Christian, and evangelical circles there can be so much harsh, cruel and ruthless dismissal of problem people. Too often, not the slightest attempt is made to understand why they behave as they do, or to bring them to our blessed Lord's touchstone, 'Neither do I condemn thee; go and sin no more'.

Our concern here is for those who for whatever reason and at whatever stage in their development have become so completely warped and twisted that to them the natural has become unnatural and the unnatural natural. It is ours to help them see that this is the work of the devil in their lives. Just as some are born spina bifida or with other physical malformations, there are those who are either born with, or quickly acquire and develop, unnatural tendencies to the exclusion of the natural. This leads to their revulsion against what is natural. Short of a miraculous transformation by grace, they need to be helped to accept their thorn in the flesh, as Paul did, as a cross

to be accepted for Christ's sake and used for his glory. Some of the most gifted people in the world in various realms have owed their God-used gift to the drive of sexual abnormality which has been accepted as an affliction (permitted by God, though obviously attributable to fallen human nature), to be to a degree sublimated, transformed and used to the glory of God.

### Godly sublimation

I have known those who were faced with extreme temptation to 'unnatural sin' who so resolutely refused to succumb to what fatally attracted them but knew was wrong, that I was astonished. But on reflection, I knew why their aesthetic, pastoral, and preaching gifts were signally used of God. That very drive which could have ruined them was used, when transmogrified into an instrument of God, as the means of saving and blessing many.

But let me emphasise again, that all such godly sublimation of seemingly innate sexual abnormality, when accepted and given over to God for death, and transformation, has taken place, because the tendency has been recognised as a fault and flaw and not as another kind of normality! It is therefore to be mortified with a view to seeing how the Lord will re-channel its drive, if intractable, towards something to be used by God, and which could become as beautiful as the product of those to whom.

Not only in the realms of artistic endeavour, but in those of loving relationships, especially in the befriending and helping of needy souls, God has used people who endure agonisingly painful deviant tendencies, but who have given their maladjustment to him for transformation. This is true of far more than many who are rigidly moralistic in the Christian world would believe! Some people hold up their hands in holy horror at even hearing that so and so has such a problem. But if they knew how sympathetic the Lord is to the affliction, and how He stands ready to use it when it is given to him, they might be shocked out of

their self-righteousness.

Jesus is far more daring in what he does and whom he employs than many exceedingly pious souls dare to believe. Perhaps that's why hypocrites don't like to get too near him. He's a shocker!

### The cost

But the cost to such suffering souls! Who can compute it? What the so-called incurable homosexual soul endures in loneliness and unfulfilled longing is something which long experience of sharing with such souls has taught me to be nothing less than an excruciating agony. If there is one thing such souls need above all, it is counsel on two fronts: first, that affliction with an unnatural propensity, which can only come from Satan—by whatever means is beside the point—has to be accepted; and, second, like Paul's thorn in the flesh, it has to be given over to God for him to transform. This can be done through grace when it is sublimated into something beautiful and wonderfully useful to him. In short, what we pastors must do is to face the biblical truth about such tendencies and then, accepting that they are warps and twists, seek God's help to find for such souls, if there is to be no cure, a true sublimation and outlet which is both approved and blessed by God.

At the same time we ought to see to it that we make the sacrificial lot of these souls as comfortable as possible. Perhaps frustrated Christian counselors should find it in their hearts to pray, that it might be in the divine will for such people to find someone with whom a friendship can be formed and a level of association maintained which helps in bearing each other's burden in Christ, according to Christ's rules of purity.

### Notes

- 1 Liz Hodgkinson, 'Body and Mind: Lightness of Being Celebrate' in *The Times*, Tuesday 19th January 1993.
- 2 *Submission on Human Sexuality*, Forum Paper published by Rutherford House, 1993.

## Make Me Thy Fuel

From prayer that asks that I may  
be  
Sheltered from winds that beat  
on Thee,  
From fearing when I should  
aspire,  
From faltering when I should  
climb higher,  
From silken self, I Captain, free  
Thy soldier who would follow  
Thee.

From subtle love of softening  
things,  
From easy choices, weakenings,  
Not thus are spirits fortified,  
Not this way went the  
Crucified,  
From all that dims Thy Calvary,  
O Lamb of God, deliver me.

Give me the love that leads the  
way,  
The faith that nothing can  
dismay,  
The hope no disappointments  
tire,  
The passion that will burn like  
fire,  
Let me not sink to be a clod:  
Make me Thy fuel, Flame of  
God!

*Amy Carmichael  
Dohnavur, S.India*

## *Prayer*

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**M**et the Revd Chuck MacVicar. He is a rather shy young minister, who was not at all a likely candidate for the vacant charge of Inverclachan Old. Chuck had been born and bred a Glaswegian, and he'd grown up loving the city, knowing it inside out.

Now, after a suburban assistantship, Chuck found himself in the least likely charge he had ever imagined—the remote highland parish of Inverclachan. His people were scattered over a vast area of heather covered hills, and though the church was situated in a village of some two thousand souls, Chuck's annual pastoral mileage was easily going to top the 20,000 mark.

Chuck had determined to get to know his parish and his people before he tried to introduce any radical changes in congregational life. Though his charge was heavily aid-receiving, and able to make only a token contribution to the wider work of the church, he found that he was pastoring a busy little community. The church

first winter while the school hall was undergoing emergency repairs) school dinners!

Chuck believed in prayer. 'What's so unusual about that?' someone asks. 'Surely every minister believes in prayer?' But I didn't quite mean it like that. Chuck believed that his congregation would only develop and grow as they learned to pray—not just as individuals, but corporately as the people of God. He believed that truly to be the Church, his people should be praying. He believed that he was engaged in spiritual warfare, and that the place of prayer was where the battle was going to be fought and won. In other words, one of his most urgent goals was the establishment of a prayer meeting.

### **Not for us**

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He had tentatively voiced to an elder called Tom his desire to see prayer becoming more important in the congregation's life. Tom was deeply committed to the church's work and

meeting. But it was attended by the narrowest and most unpopular people in the village', Tom explained. As he elaborated on his prejudice against prayer meetings and all who attended such gatherings, Chuck's heart sank. He knew that he was up against major obstacles in his objective of promoting corporate prayer in Inverclachan Old. The village culture would be unanimous: 'Prayer Meetings—not for us! We are not, and never want to be, that kind of 'Christian'!

### **Where and when?**

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Of course, Chuck had other seemingly insurmountable problems over starting a prayer meeting. Where would any gathering for prayer be held? And when? There were already so many activities going on that he was not master in his own house. He simply didn't have the disposal of the inadequate facilities which were supposed to be the 'church hall'. The hall and the small session room were constantly occupied.

# A Prayer Meeting at Inverclachan Old?

## David Searle

hall (used also as the village hall) was in constant demand all week. From a playgroup in the mornings, to monthly dances on Saturday evenings, the halls convenor's diary was choc-a-bloc with bookings every day and night of the week: Woman's Guild, the Rural Institute, Mature Movers (a keep fit class for senior citizens), Girls' Brigade, (no Boys' Brigade), Gardeners' Club, and even (for two months during his

was eager to help and support Chuck in every way he could. At the mention of a prayer meeting, his face had fallen.

'My granny told me that years ago, when there was a wee Gospel meeting in the village, they had a prayer

To make matters worse, the accommodation was in a shocking state. The toilets were a disgrace. The paintwork of the hall was filthy. The floors were more like the floors of a warehouse. He was amazed that every-

one tolerated such awful conditions.

When he raised the matter of the state of the church halls at his quoad omnia kirk session, the reason became clear. The treasurer received paltry contributions to church funds from the various groups using the premises and the few hundred pounds income each year had completely blinded the Session's minds to the real situation.

### Strategy

So where was Chuck to begin? There was always the manse. It was a large, rambling 19th century rural manse. But Chuck was wary about gathering a small coterie in his own home. With a wisdom beyond his years, he suspected that should a handful gather in the manse drawing room for prayer, either they would be folk coming out of curiosity, wanting to ingratiate themselves into his friendship, or else they would be instantly marked out by the rest of the villagers as people to be watched and even mistrusted.

Reluctantly, therefore, Chuck concluded after several months prayerful thought that any prayer meeting in Inverclachan Old was going to have to wait. In the meantime, he would prepare for prayer. A four point strategy formed itself in his mind.

### Sermons

He had begun preaching through the Sermon on the Mount. When he reached Matthew 6, he would go very slowly and expound as eloquently and relevantly as he ever could the Lord's teaching on prayer. He might even go off on excursus elsewhere in Scripture, both OT and NT, to illustrate and amplify the subject of prayer. That must be his foundational work: he must let the Scriptures speak for themselves on prayer.

### Intercessory Prayers

Secondly, he could work at making his own pulpit intercessory prayers more relevant and interesting. So he began introducing his second prayer by informing the congregation what they were going to pray for. He kept careful records of all he said, because he was

taking a personal, private stand of faith that God was going to prove to his people that he could and did answer believing prayer.

Don't for one moment think that Chuck did this lightly. He agonised over those intercessory prayers. Let me give you just one example. Chuck's second autumn in Inverclachan was the wettest on record. The rain fell day

beginning now to flow.

### Prayer Diary

Chuck's third line of approach was to introduce into the quarterly Church Newsletter a Prayer Diary. It wasn't an elaborate scheme of things. He simply gave a prayer topic for each week of the quarter alongside suggested Bible readings. If the Word of God was

## *The village culture would be unanimous: 'Prayer Meetings—not for us!'*

after day. Meanwhile, the harvest was rotting on its stalks. The hill farmers were complaining bitterly. They were going to be ruined, they said. Chuck delayed the Harvest Thanksgiving Service—how could you have a thanksgiving for the harvest when it was slowly being ruined?

The last Sunday in October, after wrestling all week in his study over the issue, Chuck introduced his intercessory prayer as being specifically for the harvest. He was going to pray for three weeks of no rain so that the grain could be gathered in. The congregation fell silent with one of those silences which can be felt. Chuck knew what they were thinking: 'This man actually believes God is hearing him and will answer. Let's wait and see if his God is real!'

I will not tell you of the agony of soul the young minister endured those following three weeks. What I will tell is that God did hear and did answer. Harvest Thanksgiving took place the Sunday after Remembrance Day. There had been no rain. The harvest had been salvaged and gathered in. God had honoured the faith of his young servant!

Chuck's intercessions thereafter took on a new seriousness in the minds of his people. Don't think for one moment that everyone in church now believed in prayer. Not that. Many were thinking deeply. Most were watching and listening with more personal involvement in the worship. The ebb tide had turned and was

beginning to sow seeds, and if his people were engaging, with him, in prayer each Sunday morning, some perhaps would begin to pray at home. (Unknown to Chuck, some were—most unlikely people, too. They were making time to be alone with God each day in the privacy of their homes).

### Sunday School Teachers

I should have told you that the one change Chuck had made at the beginning of his ministry was to alter the Sunday School time to the hour before the morning service. He had wanted to be able to visit the Sunday School and become involved (which he could not have done had it been held during the services, as formerly). His early involvement told him a sorry tale. The Sunday School, staffed by dear, well meaning folk, was probably doing more harm than good to the children attending. So he resolved to give help to make it more effective.

Hence the monthly Sunday School teachers' meeting in the Manse. It was a preparation class. Chuck had more than enough to do. But he was putting the Sunday School and its teachers high on his agenda for change. So he made the time to prepare the lessons himself and to spend one evening each month with the teachers. He was determined to get to know them, to love them, to win them.

This is where his fourth idea on prayer came in. He introduced into the preparation class a short time of prayer

for the work of the Sunday School. He didn't spring this. He rather asked each teacher to bring a prepared, written prayer to use at the preparation class — prayers for the various children in their classes, prayers for the homes, prayers for the part each had to play in the coming four weeks of Sunday School.

And so, nine of his members (there were nine Sunday School teachers) began to learn the joy and privilege of corporate prayer. Because the Sunday School met prior to the service, the teachers were now regularly attending church for the first time in years. They were growing, learning, and becoming involved on a spiritual level that was new to them.

### **Six years on**

A great deal of water has flowed under the brig over the burn that runs alongside the village green at Inverclachan. Let me mention just a few of the encouragements Chuck has seen in his first six years of ministry.

The halls are presently being refurbished. A complete face lift. New toilets, new kitchen, floors sanded and sealed, full decoration and there are plans for an additional small hall to be built on.

In the meantime, until the small hall is built, the manse drawing room is being used to accommodate a crèche each Sunday morning, and about eight or nine babies and toddlers are cared for during the service by a rota of mothers. (You'll gather the congregation has grown now that so many younger parents are attending).

The Sunday School teachers' preparation class is still held in the manse each month, but will be held in

the new small hall when it is finished next year.

Since the congregation have become accustomed to the manse being used for both crèche and preparation class, Chuck deemed it appropriate in his fourth year to begin a Bible Study on Wednesday evening which was also held in the manse. The Bible Study had been given the Kirk Session's blessing, was always announced each Sunday and was open to the whole congregation. After two years of simple Bible Study, open prayer has now been introduced as well to the Bible Study group.

Chuck used the same method as with the teachers. 'Would you like to write out a prayer for next week?' he had said. 'I'll pass my Bible round the circle, and if you don't feel ready to pray, pass the Bible on to the person next to you'. At first, less than half had taken part; the Bible had been passed on! But now, four months after introducing prayer, Chuck's heart is lifted to the gates of heaven, and his eyes are often filled with tears of joy as he enters into the humble, unadorned prayers of new young Christians.

### **No rose-tinted spectacles**

Don't for one moment think that Chuck has had an easy time. Don't think it has been all encouragement, sweetness and light. There have been great discouragements, many misunderstandings, and solid, unrelenting opposition from a few. But already, the corporate prayer is bringing a lift into the services for which Chuck (and Sheila, his wife) have longed ever since they came.

They had been surprised it had

taken so long. Their original hope had been to establish a prayer meeting within months. That it had taken six years was certainly not how they had planned. But Chuck had trodden carefully and wisely. He had been willing to bend without ever losing sight of his great objective of a congregational prayer gathering. He's still not quite there yet. He's looking forward in faith to the day, in about eighteen month's time, when the Congregational Prayer Fellowship (as he plans to call it—to avoid too strong an association of thought with past village experience of, and prejudice against, 'prayer meetings') will meet in the new hall, and thus will become established as an essential part of the very structure of the dear people of God in Inverclachan Old.

A friend of mine, on holiday in the Highlands, attended a morning service this past summer at Inverclachan Old. Chatting outside the kirk after the service to an older man who had lived all his days in the parish, he heard this comment on Chuck's ministry: 'He's doing a fine job. We might not all agree with everything he's wanting, but he's fairly brought the kirk up. And a fair number in the village are coming round to his way of thinking'. He spoke of his young minister with a warmth and affection he could not conceal. And as the old man spoke, my friend almost thought he heard the faintest sound of rejoicing far off among the angels who worship before the face of God.

## *Pastoral Skills*

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# Listening

## The first in a series of three articles by Elizabeth Frost

**D**oes it surprise you to find an article on *listening* in a journal for ministers and elders? One might have thought that listening was an activity to be taken for granted when it comes to the work of visitation. You ring the bell, ask politely if you may come in, and then sit and chat for half an hour or so, making sure you read and pray before leaving. It's as simple as that. Your member talks a little, you reply. What more is there to be said?

### **What are we listening to?**

Listening involves skills and disciplines which are often ignored. Take, for example, the question: 'What are we listening to?' The real answer lies in far more than merely the sound of words.

Yes, we are listening to words, to speech. That goes without saying. Yet there's more to it than that. We are also listening to the *choice of words* and phrases. The average person being visited could say the same thing in various ways, but chooses his or her words deliberately (though probably subconsciously), to convey a particular message and emphasis. Do we read the message and tune in to the emphasis?

We are also listening to the *tone, pitch and speed* of what is being said. We tend to think of only music or singing as having tone and pitch. Speech invariably has them too, though often we fail to be aware of them. If we know reasonably well the person being visited, then we will know their normal tone and pitch and speed of talking. Have we learned to tune in to variations of their norm, even slight variations, and to read the hidden message conveyed?

We are also listening to *silences*. How often have we all reacted to a silence by feeling we have to fill it with our own words! Silence is an important part of communication. Those silences that punctuate a story we are hearing may well be even more eloquent than the story itself. Do we take careful note of those silences, letting them 'speak'? We can be so anxious to bring our agenda into the conversation that we can completely miss the message of the silence which gives us the real clue to what the problem is.

*Tears.* Do you feel embarrassed when someone is upset? I'm not necessarily thinking about loud sobbing (though that would be

included). I'm thinking about moistened eyes and the cheek that is wet as just one tear escapes. And I'm thinking of the handkerchief to blow the nose when there was no previous sign of a cold! Tears are certainly to be taken very seriously, and the listener has to assess whether or not there is an element of manipulation here, or whether the tears are all part of the story being unfolded.

Then there is *body language*. Body language can be conveyed by facial expressions, by the hands, the feet, the posture of sitting. So that as we are listening, we are all the time taking quiet note of the signals which come from the body language of our member.

### **What is the value of being listened to?**

The couple you are visiting, Keith and Pamela, are fairly regular in church attendance. Keith is recently out of hospital and has appreciated visits during his ten days there. You have gone quite a long way along the road of coming to know them. The ice doesn't need to be broken. Small talk is unnecessary. You already know the background to their family and will not be spending time with exploratory questions to establish a profile of their home.

So both Keith and Pamela are going to talk. May I offer five ways in which you as their minister or elder will minister to them—just by listening.

**1** Keith can sound out his thinking as he talks with you. He hasn't ever spoken about spiritual things before. He's sat in church and listened to sermons. He's had his own private thoughts about them. Now, after surgery, and having been drawn much closer to you when you sat beside his hospital bed, he is ready at last to sound out his own thinking on some of the deepest thoughts he has had over these past months and years. He needs you to listen, sensitively and unobtrusively, so he can put into words what is going on in his heart.

**2** Take that process of Keith's conversation a stage further. He



needs to clarify his own thinking. He never really sorted out what his relationship to God is, or what his response is to all he has been learning of the Lord. He needs time to talk—rather, time for someone to listen—so that, perhaps awkwardly and even ineptly, he can unravel his own thinking and state in simple words what he has never said before.

**3** Pamela needs to talk as well, and she needs someone to listen to her talking. She has kept up a brave face during Keith's illness. There are emotions in her that need to be allowed to surface. So as she pours a cup of tea, and Keith relaxes having had his say, Pamela needs a listener who will not be surprised or embarrassed when she allows her pent up feelings to flow out through her conversation.

**4** This visit is of enormous importance. In fact, it is nothing less than team work. During the forty minutes you have been there, they deserve to have had your full attention. Here is Keith sounding out his thinking, clarifying at long last where he is in his pilgrimage, Pamela releasing so much she has long repressed—and you, the visitor, are there to support and enable them both in all they are doing. How awful if you think that this couple are simply names on your list, and after half an hour of chatting, dash off a prayer and hurry on to the next call! The reality ought to be so different. You are there to listen, and by listening to support, to hold up, to encourage this man and wife who have been through deep trauma, and have begun to find God at work in their lives.

**5** You have read a Psalm and prayed. As you put on your coat and lift your car keys ready to leave, Keith and Pamela accompany you to the door. You may ask as you drive away: 'Has my visit been any help to Keith and Pamela? Or have I merely used up half an hour of their precious time?' Perhaps only 10% of the conversation has been from your side. You have chosen your words carefully and prayerfully. For 90% of the time you

have been listening. What you have also done has been to pass on to this middle-age couple a sense of their worth. Your respect for what they have been saying, your courtesy, your attentiveness, above all the quality time you have given them, has left them with one of the most important lessons of their whole trauma—that they matter to you, and to God.

### Poor Listening

A. A. Milne portrays poor listening like this:

Said Eeyore, 'I make it seventeen days come Friday since anyone spoke to me'.

Said Rabbit, 'I was here myself a week ago'.

'Not conversing', said Eeyore.

'Not first one and then the other.

You said hello and flashed past'.

If you are anything like me, you will know that the visit to Keith and Pamela is the kind of contact we don't often have. So many of our visits are pretty humdrum. We are distracted by thoughts of the work load waiting at home in the study, or by the prospects of a difficult agenda at the committee meeting that evening. It may be that our real motivation is that we want to be able to tick off one more visit so we can make our way home saying, 'Well at least I got four visits done this afternoon!'

When we are in that frame of mind, the likelihood is that our level of listening has fallen very seriously. Instead of being relaxed and interested, we have let our gaze wander, we have been passive instead of active, distracted instead of attentive. Whether we realise it or not, we will have conveyed unspoken messages to them that we are neither interested nor concerned.

They may not be able to articulate it, but subconsciously it will have registered: the minister was winding his watch; he kept glancing at the clock; he must have been in a hurry to get away. I didn't matter very much to him. That is invariably the result of poor listening.

### Good Listening

Instead of glancing at the clock, or out of the window at the garden, we must maintain fairly steady eye contact. Because we are alert and concentrating on our member, we will not stifle a yawn! We will be reflecting on what they are saying, and consequently will be feeding back to them the occasional brief comment, to assure them we have heard and are listening to their story.

Our body language will also assure them of our full attention. Our posture will be relaxed. We will not be shuffling, shifting position or appearing restive. Our body will be turned towards them, not away from them, in such a manner as will inspire both confidence and an opening of their hearts to us.

We will allow our member to take the 'steering wheel' in the conversation, and be willing ourselves to be the passenger. That requires humility and patience.

It may be that you feel you are doing very little, and saying even less. You are letting them do the work, and you'll be surprised when they express great appreciation for the help you have been to them.

Perhaps this first brief article will remind us that listening is both a skill and a discipline. Although I have just said that the person being visited 'has done the work', our part in listening will have demanded concentration and attention. That too is work. So we will often be very tired and drained after an afternoon or evening of visitation.

A closing thought is to think how wonderful a listener our Lord is. Think of all the prayers and cries that come before him. Seek to listen as he listens. This is one of the simplest, but most often forgotten lessons that the Chief Shepherd wants to teach to those who are under-shepherds.

*Elizabeth Frost is a Social Worker at Belvoir Park Hospital, Belfast.*

## Book Reviews

### **By Word and Deed: Sharing the Good News through Mission**

Colin Cranston (ed.)  
Church House Publishing, London, 1992; 182pp., £7.50  
ISBN 0 7151 4822 2

Here, in the form of an introductory essay plus eleven others, together with a short foreword and longer epilogue—all by different writers with different theological perspectives from all over the globe—we have a kaleidoscopic Anglican comment of the Decade of Evangelism. 'The authors explore the components, contexts and priorities of mission and their relations to the centrality of evangelism' (p. vii). The 'components' in Section II are proclamation of the good news (helpful), transformation of church and society (rather grand), compassionate service of the needy (challenging) and safeguarding the integrity of creation (lucid).

Of the three essays on 'context', Alexander Malik, a Pakistani bishop is most illuminating on mission in a country dominated by Islam. Jaci Maraschin's is, for me, almost impenetrable.

The quality of Section III (Movement to Mission: A Massive Shift) is, like the others, uneven. Yong Ping Chung's account of mission and evangelism in Sabah somewhat flies in the face of the plea for holistic mission made in the earlier chapters, but is no less refreshing for that! His pungent comment on page 151 is: 'All this may sound very un-Anglican. But praise God that it is biblical'.

So, a real curate's egg, but the good parts are worth reading.

*Rev. Graham Foster, Dundee*

### **Awakening to a World of Need**

Timothy Chester  
Inter Varsity Press, Leicester, 1993, 234pp., n/p  
ISBN 0 85110 989 6

To mark the 25th anniversary of TEAR Fund, Tim Chester, Public Affairs officer of TEAR Fund (UK), tells the story of the recovery of evangelical social concern in the last 30 years. Though some arrangement of material

is thematic and not chronological, this is not an evaluation of a movement from a particular sociological or theological perspective, but a sympathetic piece of story telling that introduces a number of movements, emphases and organisations. Here we find out more about journals such as *Transformation* and *Third Way*, organisations such as *Evangelical Christians for Racial Justice*, and the *Jubilee Centre*, and conferences that have shaped things, and much more. Inevitably, since there is so much to cover, some will feel that there should be more attention given to certain things than others, but overall Tim Chester has done an admirable job and told the story in clear, interesting and perceptive terms.

Chester is to be congratulated for reminding us of the influence of society as a whole on the width of recent evangelical social concern (it is not just a re-reading of the Bible that has made the difference). Key areas of debate are covered, such as creation versus the Kingdom of God as a basis for social ethics. The importance of first hand contact which has resulted in much evangelical stimulus coming from the Third World or areas of urban deprivation is acknowledged. And in his conclusion Chester is surely right in saying that at the bottom of our diffidence is that we are simply too worldly.

Our attention is drawn to debates where the rise of evangelical social concern has been regarded with fear that it will detract from evangelism, and whether or not the explicit acknowledgement of Christ as Lord is essential if our actions are to be part of mission. The book, however, would have better scratched an itch if he had also focused more on why so many evangelicals agree that social action is important but so few get around to it. For instance why are we so hesitant to be involved in the wider movements such as *Amnesty International* and the *World Development Movement*? Is it not that we don't really believe that the actions themselves are part of our discipleship unless there is a 'sound'

veneer that makes it acceptable?

*Rev. Gordon Palmer, Edinburgh*

### **Doubt: Handling it Honestly**

Alister McGrath  
Inter Varsity Press, 1990, 144pp., £2.50  
ISBN 0 85110 850 4

Because Christians often regard doubt as a spiritual flaw many respond to rising doubts by suppressing them. Instead, McGrath invites us to see doubt as 'an invitation to grow in faith and understanding'. He discusses some of the roots of doubt such as a temperamental predisposition, an over-preoccupation with experience and false ideas of God. Subsequent chapters explore doubts about the gospel, its adequacy for our complex age; about ourselves; about Jesus, the historicity of the gospels; and about God, his character and very existence. The final chapter offers very practical suggestions for facing up to such doubts and turning them into opportunities for spiritual growth.

Such a short treatment can only point in the direction of answers, I found the treatment of issues arising in contemporary theological debate too perfunctory. But the honest and practical handling of the subject, together with a valuable booklist for further reading make this a useful and accessible pastoral resource.

*Rev. Chris Park, Paisley*

### **Opening Up the Bible**

Mary Bachelor  
Lion Publishing, Oxford, 1993, 173pp., £12.99  
ISBN 0 7459 2404 2

This book is a general introduction to the Bible, written at a popular level and in non-technical language. In thirteen sections the Old Testament books are grouped according to date or theme, and the New Testament books by Bible order. The contents, message and purpose of each book is briefly summarised and inevitably, although the main points are not missed, this is very sketchy. Key verses are quoted and key chapters and events noted in the margin. References to authorship,

origin and date take a broadly conservative stance and are often non-committal.

There are many useful maps, *e.g.* Israel's wanderings; helpful diagrams such as that of Herod's temple; special articles on the cultural and political background covering subjects such as music and the Babylonian empire. There is also a chapter on the inter-Testamental period.

The book is beautifully presented, attractive, well-written and easy to use. It would be an excellent guide to a first time Bible reader wanting their bearings, or someone wanting to read larger portions to get a feel of the historical flow and overall sweep of the Bible message. Theologically it is very light and more knowledgeable readers would find the brevity unsatisfying apart from the occasionally striking insights.

*Rev. David Cupples, Enniskillen*

### **The Life of John Duncan**

A. Moody Stuart

Banner of Truth Trust, 1991, 231pp., £6.95

ISBN 0 85151 608 4

The subject of this biography, known affectionately as Rabbi Duncan because of his learning and his love for the Jews, was one of the foremost thinkers in the revival of Evangelicalism in nineteenth century Scotland.

Two biographies of Duncan were published shortly after his death: one by David Brown his lifelong friend from student days in Aberdeen, and one by his minister in Edinburgh. Whilst both books are necessary to anything approaching a full understanding of the man, this is the more concise and readable and it devotes a greater proportion of space to the later period of his life. Brown gives greater insight into Duncan's pantheism and atheism in his student days and his subsequent conversion. Nonetheless, I recommend this work by Stuart as a good introduction to one of the most fascinating characters the Scottish church has ever produced.

*Rev. Alex J. MacDonald, Edinburgh*

### **David Livingstone: The Truth Behind the Legend**

Rob MacKenzie

Kingsway Publications, Eastbourne, 1993, 423pp., n/p

ISBN 0 85476 387 2

This is a chronological record of Livingstone's life containing sufficient quotations from his journals and letters to encourage us to read them for ourselves. Unlike so many evangelical hagiographies we are treated to a picture of a great man's achievements, and his failings. No attempt is made to gloss over the effect that Livingstone's long absences from home had on his family, especially on his son Robert. The book helps us to grasp something of the stature of Livingstone and keeps before us the truth that in all he did he saw himself as a servant of Jesus Christ.

Speaking of Billy Graham, Charles Colson writes, 'In my opinion, when the mantle of leadership is passed it will not fall to any one individual but to hundreds, perhaps thousands'. While focusing in his final chapter on the work of one contemporary evangelist in Africa, Rob MacKenzie clearly believes that Livingstone's mantle has passed to the many thousands of African believers who continue to spread the gospel in that continent today.

*Rev. Alex Slorach, Duns*

### **Robert Laws: Servant of Africa**

Hamish McIntosh

Handsel Press, Carberry, Scotland, 1993, 290pp., £14.95

ISBN 1 871825 155

For the many in Malawi, Scotland and beyond, who know and love Malawi this will be a welcome and inspiring new account of life and ministry of one of Scotland's truly great pioneer missionaries. Laws went to Africa in the 1870's and served in what is now called Malawi for fifty years. By the grace of God and the help of many fellow missionaries, especially his wife Margaret, and many African people, he transformed a land subject to the appalling cruelties of the Arab slave traders, the ravages of tribal warfare, the enormous fear of superstition, to a

place of fair trade, excellent education, peace and Christian faith.

We read about the problems of governing and disciplining a colony of those who are fleeing the slave trade; the careful, patient and effective proclamation of the gospel; and the establishment of medical and educational work. Though this work started slowly it led to a strong and mature African church that reconciled many warring tribes.

Undeterred by disease, wild animals and the effects of the First World War on the mission, Laws doggedly carried on, giving his life to the cause of Christ in a strange land. He combined a simple belief in the cross of Christ, the love of God and the truth of the Bible, with a deep respect for the African peoples.

As well as evangelism his ambition was to bring the highest possible education to the local community. This brought him some criticism, higher education being considered irrelevant to the needs of Africa. However, Africans today appreciate the fact that he treated them as equal to Europeans and did not want for them what he regarded as a second class education. The Knowledge of the classics, philosophy and theology that Laws strove to give to the Livingstonia Africans, at such an early stage, is truly remarkable. The impressive strength of the church in Malawi today bears ample testimony to the fruits of the labours of Robert Laws.

*Rev. Howard Taylor, Glasgow*